

Peasants and the Countryside in Post-1975 Vietnamese Literature

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Abstract

Work on peasants and the countryside was a main corpus of twentieth-century Vietnamese literature. As a part of a mass mobilisation for the construction of a Socialist agricultural model and military struggles against foreign troops, the representation of peasants and the countryside in Vietnamese literature prior to 1975 was closely related to political agendas. This thesis seeks to explore the changes and continuities in stories about peasants and the countryside in post-1975 Vietnamese literature. The socio-political changes since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and a greater freedom of expression granted during the Renovation period in the mid-1980s, are significant to the development of Vietnamese literary life in general, and the representation of peasants and the countryside in particular. It is proposed in this thesis that there are, together with socio-political changes in the post-war period, four major factors that account for changes in the way peasants and the countryside have been portrayed in post-1975 Vietnamese literature: the decline of Socialist Realism; the reinterpretation of collectivism and individualism; the transformation of literary generations from urban-based/middle-class to peasant-originated authors; and the socio-political disillusionment in post-war society. As a result of the changes, peasants and rural life began to be explored and represented from new perspectives. Writers began to depict peasants as individuals, not merely faceless masses, as portrayed in wartime literature. This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first explores how peasants and the countryside were represented in Vietnamese literature prior to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The second chapter examines the socio-political context of the post-war society and its relation to changes and continuities of the representation of peasants and the countryside in post-1975 literature. The third chapter is about the portrayal of peasant women. The fourth chapter discusses how the conflict between the city and the countryside is articulated. The final chapter presents how the land reform programme is remembered in literary works.

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Introduction

The aim of this study is three-fold. Firstly, its main purpose is to study how Vietnamese peasants and the countryside are represented in post-1975 Vietnamese literature, including changes and continuities in their representation, as compared with previous periods. Secondly, it attempts to study the literary techniques employed by Vietnamese writers, such as style of writing, genres, themes and characterisation, in order to examine how texts are constructed. This will illustrate not only the change of literary techniques used to represent peasants and the countryside, but also the development of Vietnamese literature in the post-1975 period as a whole. Thirdly, the thesis aims to analyse the social and political context of fictional writing about peasants and the countryside. It will do this by focusing on the socio-political context and on the writers' political commitments and attitude.

Hitherto, the study of how peasants and the countryside are represented in Vietnamese literature has been sporadic. The importance of peasants was emphasised after the Communist government took control of the northern part of the country. Writers and artists, literary critics and scholars were required to respond to the government's policy on peasants and the countryside. The studies of peasants' roles in society and village culture were part of a mass mobilisation movement led by the Communist Party. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that many studies of the representation of peasants appeared in the 1950s, after the Party took control over the northern part of the country, and focused on the struggle of peasants against feudal society, the colonial regime and foreign troops.

Folk literature, which is regarded as 'the literature of the people', was widely explored by critics and literary scholars in the 1950s. There were a number of studies of the peasants and rural life as seen through folk songs and tales, notably Vũ Ngọc Phan's essays such as *Người Nông Dân Việt Nam trong Truyện Cổ Tích* (Vietnamese Peasants in Fairy Tales) [1955] and *Những Tiếng Phản Kháng của Phụ Nữ Nông Thôn trong Dân Ca Việt Nam* (Rural Women's Voices of Resistance in Folk Songs) [1955]. Other studies in this period were *Về Truyện Tấm Cám* (About The Story of Tấm and Cám) [reprinted in 1999] by Đình Gia Khánh and *Văn Học Nhân Dân của Ta* (Literature of Our People) [1955] by Minh-Tranh, whose main approach was to

describe how oppressed the peasants were in feudal society. The notion of class struggle was often used to analyse folk songs and folk stories during this period.

The topic of how peasants and the countryside were depicted in the novels and short stories of 1930-1945 is popular among Vietnamese critics and writers, even today. An example of this is the article *Hình Tượng Người Làng Quê Tha Hoá trong Văn Xúi Hiện Thực Việt Nam 1930-1945* (The Portrayal of Villagers and Their Moral Decline in Vietnamese Prose Fiction 1930-1945) [1999] by Nguyễn Kim Hồng. The period 1930-1945 is regarded as 'the golden age' of stories about peasants and the countryside. However, the study of 1930-1945 literature tends to be based upon specific works of particular writers, rather than taking a comparative approach in order to see the development of the topic as a whole. For example, the famous novel *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light is Out) by Ngô Tất Tố is referred to in many essays and articles, such as *Những Đóng Góp của Ngô Tất Tố trong Tắt Đèn* (The Contribution of Ngô Tất Tố in *Tắt Đèn*) [1963] by Phong Lê, *Tắt Đèn của Ngô Tất Tố* (When the Light is Out by Ngô Tất Tố) [1973] by Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, and *Tắt Đèn của Ngô Tất Tố: Một Tác Phẩm Sâu Sắc Nhất về Nông Dân Nước Ta trước Cách Mạng* (*Tắt Đèn* by Ngô Tất Tố: One of the Best Stories about Peasants before The August Revolution) [1977] by Như Phong. These studies focus on the writer's attitudes towards peasants and on the literary techniques he or she used to construct the stories. The same methodology is applied in the study of the representation of peasants and the countryside by other writers. Generally speaking, Vietnamese critics try to draw a connection between social reality and what is represented in the novel, in order to evaluate how realistic the representation of peasants was. The studies of other well-known works in this period, such as *Chí Phèo* (Chí Phèo) by Nam Cao, *Bước Đường Cùng* (Impasse) by Nguyễn Công Hoan, and *Giông Tố* (The Storms) by Vũ Trọng Phụng, are conducted in the same way.

In the studies of the representation of peasants and the countryside in the literature of 1945-1975, critics mainly focus on the social meaning of literary works, as opposed to their literary merit and aesthetic value. It would appear that their main task is to remind writers to follow the Socialist Realist style of writing, and to illustrate government policy on agriculture. Moreover, the evaluation of literary works is based on how well they respond to the government's agricultural policies, rather than their literary merits. Examples of this are *Vấn Đề Văn Học Phản ánh Nông Thôn Hợp Tác*

Hoá (The Problem of Reflecting Agricultural Cooperation in Literature) [1971] and *Vấn Đề Phản Ảnh Hiện Thực Sản Xuất Lớn Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa ở Nông Thôn* (The Problem of Reflecting the Reality of the Socialist Means of Production in the Countryside) [1978] by Thành Duy, and *Văn Xuôi và Con Người Mới Nông Thôn trong Cách Mạng Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa* (Prose Fiction and New People in the Countryside in the Socialist Revolution) [1978] by Phong Lê.

The study of the representation of peasants and the countryside in post-1975 literature has been particularly sporadic. An interesting article is *Văn Xuôi Viết về Nông Thôn từ Nửa sau Những Năm 80* (Prose Stories on the Countryside in the 1980s) [1995] by Trần Cương. The article includes a brief survey of change and continuity in stories about peasants and the countryside written in the 1980s. It focuses on two aspects: changes of theme, and how the reality of the countryside is reflected through novels and short stories. However, the limited four-page length of the article does not allow its author to discuss these issues in detail.

The portrayal of peasants and rural life is also referred to in the discussion of certain novels and short stories, for example *Về Tiểu Thuyết Bến Không Chồng của Dương Hương* (On the Novel called *A Watering Place for Women with No Husband* by Dương Hương) [1991] by Nguyễn Văn Long, *Đọc Nguyễn Minh Châu từ Bức Tranh đến Phiên Chợ Giát* (Reading Nguyễn Minh Châu from The Portrait to The Giát Market) [1997] by Hoàng Ngọc Hiến and *Sáng Tác của Lê Lựu* (The Works of Lê Lựu) [1998] by Bích Thu. Although these critics discussed writers' views on peasants and the problems of the countryside, their main focus is not the representation of peasants and the countryside, but the contribution made by these works towards the development of post-1975 literature.

There are a number of studies written in English that refer to the importance of peasants and the countryside in Vietnam. However, most of these studies are anthropological, historical and sociological, such as in *The Fate of the Peasant* [1986] by Andrew Vickerman, and *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam 1925-1988* [1992] by Hy V. Luong. Literary texts may be used, but only as a means of illustration. For example, in her doctoral thesis, entitled *Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution, 1920-1957* [1981],

Christine White used the short story *Planting Stakes in Cau Field* [1955] to illustrate how the land reform campaign was carried out in Northern Vietnam during the 1950s.

Other examples are Ngo Vinh Long's works, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French* [1991] and *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution: The French Colonial Period* [1974]. Ngo Vinh Long's studies provide good translations of short stories and excerpts from Vietnamese texts, as well as short introductions to the socio-political context of the colonial period. Likewise, in a more recently published book, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta* [1999], Pham Van Bich uses literary works, such as *Mảnh Đất Lắm Người Nhiều Ma* (The Land with Many People and Ghosts) [1991] by Nguyễn Khắc Trường, to exemplify the relationship between husband and wife in peasant families. In these studies, literary texts are employed as historical records or illustrations for the purpose of anthropological, historical and sociological studies of the development of Vietnamese society in different epochs.

This thesis therefore aims to present a more complete, if not unprecedented, study of the representation of peasants and the countryside in Vietnamese literature, and to draw a connection between the social significance of literary works and their literary merits. It is primarily focused on the analysis of selected pieces of novels, short stories and reportages in post-1975 literature that deal with peasants and the countryside. Since Vietnam has moved towards a market economy and developed international relationships with other countries from the mid-1980s onwards, more literary works have been introduced and translated into foreign languages. Nevertheless, Vietnamese literature is still scarcely known outside the country, and some of the works included in this study may be unknown to foreign readers. Important socio-political accounts will also be included in this study to establish the political standpoint of authors and to examine the social significance of selected texts, as well as to gain an understanding of the contexts within which the texts are constructed.

α The methodology of the study is based primarily on textual analysis of literary works and related materials, such as biographies, personal memoirs and historical records. The main literary texts are selected from award-winning works, and other outstanding work by well-known writers. Excerpts from literary works are included in order to

demonstrate the arguments and remarks raised in this thesis. All translations from Vietnamese excerpts in this thesis are mine, unless otherwise indicated. A fieldtrip to Vietnam was conducted during August 1999-July 2000. During that trip, library researches were carried out, mainly at *Thư Viện Quốc Gia* (National Library), *Viện Văn Học* (Institute of Literature), and *Trường Đại Học Sư Phạm* (Teachers' Training College), as were interviews and conversations with writers, critics and scholars.

As this study focuses on the portrayal of peasants and the countryside in Vietnamese literature, the link between literary texts and their socio-political contexts cannot be avoided. The study tries to employ intrinsic and extrinsic approaches in reading literary works as René Wellek and Austin Warren suggested in their acclaimed book, *Theory of Literature* [first published in 1949]. This study attempts to look into the texts as well as to explore other issues that emerge from the texts. That is to say, it will examine the various structures of selected works, such as the development of plot, narrative voice, use of language, characterisation, and choices of metaphors and symbols, in order to understand how each literary work is constructed. However, the study will not isolate the texts from their historical, political and social contexts. Instead, it will concentrate on relating texts to the contexts in which they are written, and other aspects including the author's biography, settings and gender issues.

The key words in this study are 'peasants' and 'the countryside'. The word 'peasant' contains economic, political, sociological or even cultural meanings. The definition of the term is still debatable and unsettled. For example, for Teodor Shanin, peasants mean:

the majority of mankind. For all but comparatively few countries, 'the people' (as opposed to 'the nation') still denotes peasants, the notion of specific 'ethnic culture' closely corresponds to the local peasant culture, 'the army' means peasant sons in uniform, officered by men different from themselves.¹

According to Eric Wolf, peasants are:

¹ Shanin, Teodor. *Defining Peasants*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. P. 22.

those large segments of mankind which stand midway between the primitive tribe and industrial society. Those populations many millions strong, neither primitive nor modern, form the majority of mankind. They are important historically, because industrial society is built upon the ruins of peasant society.²

Raymond Williams explains that, for the Third World, the word 'peasant' or 'peasantry' contains:

a major sense, of a distinct social and economic group, and peasant has, in some contexts, been given both descriptive and heroic revolutionary connotations.³

Despite the many explanations of the complex meaning of this word, 'peasants' in this study refers broadly to those who work on the land and live in 'the countryside'; i.e. outside the capital city, Hanoi, and other big cities, such as Ho Chi Minh City. In this study, the word 'farmer' is synonymous with 'peasant'.

It is also noticeable that there are many theories regarding Vietnamese peasants and many explanations for their rebellions.⁴ However, this study does not intend to touch upon this subject or base its argument on any specific theory. Its main purpose is to examine how peasants and the countryside are constructed and represented in post-1975 Vietnamese literature. It is hoped that through this attempt, we will gain a better understanding not only of how peasants and the countryside became an inspiration for literary creativity, but also of how the intellectual and literary life of Vietnam has been interrelated with its political and military struggles.

The selection of literary works in this thesis mainly follows the literary canon in Vietnam, or to be more exact, the list of literary works that are accepted as good

² Wolf, Eric. *Peasant*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966. P. vii.

³ Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana Press, 1983. P. 232.

⁴ For example, FitzGerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*. London: Macmillan, 1972. Popkin, Samuel L. *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*. California: University of California Press, 1979. Wolf, Eric R. *Peasants*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

literature by literary institutions and academics in Hanoi. This canonising of Vietnamese literature may seem to many to be a reflection of power relations, rather than a fair evaluation of aesthetic values, because it excludes some dissident writers that express critical views of the government. Some works are included in the canon because of their correct social and political content rather than their ability to stand the test of time. However, despite those shortcomings, these works can reflect the social reality and values of particular periods.

X Nevertheless, in this study, some works that are not included in the Vietnamese literary canon, such as Dương Thu Hương's best-selling novel, *Những Thiên Đường Mù* (Paradise of the Blind) [1988] and Tô Hoài's controversial memoir, *Chiều Chiều* (Afternoons) [1999], are also included. This is because their contents show the development of the countryside and reflect the life of Vietnamese peasants.

Moreover, the selection of literary texts discussed in this thesis is not restricted to novels and short stories but also includes *Ký* (also seen as *Kí*). This literary genre has no clear definition, but can probably be roughly translated as 'literary reportage', which is the term used for several forms of writing such as *ký* (memoirs), *phóng sự* (reportage), and *tiểu luận* (essays).⁵ *Ký* and *phóng sự* were popular forms that writers in the 1930s employed to disclose social problems and to criticise the colonial government. However, *ký* and *phóng sự* almost disappeared from the literary scene in the North during the war, perhaps because these literary forms normally reflect urgent social problems and expose the darker side of society. This goes contrary to the official style of Socialist Realism, which requires positive elements in literature. Nevertheless, memoirs and reportage became more popular again in the post-1975 period, notably after the Renovation policy was declared in 1986.

According to Trường Đình Luân, memoirs and reportage have contributed significantly to the development of post-1975 literature and the representation of the problems of peasants and the countryside in two major ways. First, reportage, as a literary genre, is a useful device for revealing the negative side of society, such as the oppression of people and the corruption of local cadres, which is an important issue in the countryside. Secondly, it portrays the life of the peasants, the social class that

⁵ For a clear explanation of *Ký*, see Hoàng Ngọc Hiến. *Năm Bài Giảng về Thể Loại* (The Explanations of Five Literary Genres). Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998. Pp. 5-24.

sacrificed more than others for the survival of the nation, in the post-war period.⁶ Similarly, Nguyễn Ngọc, the former editor of the literary journal *Văn Nghệ*, also reveals that there was an attempt to revitalise reportage because it contains the character *giàu tính chiến đấu* (rich in the element of resistance). In 1988, the journal *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and the Art) published a number of reportages discussing the problems of the countryside. Moreover, many of reportages that appeared on the pages of journals and magazines in the late 1980s reflect the decline of agricultural collectivisation and the poverty of peasants.⁷ Thus, it is necessary to include selected pieces of *Ký* in this study.

Focusing on the texts mainly written by party writers and listed in the official literary canon may give the impression that this study largely ignores the difference of literary scenes between the North and the South, or different characteristics of rural development between the two regions. However, the study aims to explore the portrayal of peasants and the countryside in the post-1975 period, when the North and the South were reunited into one Vietnam. Thus, the geographical difference should not be a big issue for this timeframe. However, this is not to say that this thesis tries to deny the dissimilarity of the peasants in the two regions which has been observed in several anthropological, historical and sociological studies, but, rather, that this subject is beyond the scope of the focus of this study and perhaps needs to be explored in a different project.

Furthermore, writing about peasants and the countryside was never a main focus of literary creativity in the South during the period the nation was divided (1954-1975). This can be explained by the fact that the government in South Vietnam had no special policy to promote the role of peasants and the countryside⁸ and literary activity

⁶ Trương Đình Luân, 'Vai Trò của Ký trong Cao Trào Văn Nghệ Phản Kháng' (The Role of Reportage in the Movement of Literature of Resistance) in *Trăm Hoa vẫn Nở trên Quê Hương: Cao Trào Văn Nghệ Phản Kháng tại Việt Nam (1986-1989)* (One Hundred Flowers still Blossom in Homeland: The Movement of Literature of Resistance in Vietnam (1986-1989)). Reseda, CA: Lê Trần Publishing Company, 1990. P. 682.

⁷ Nguyễn Ngọc, 'Phỏng Vấn Nguyễn Ngọc: Tổng Biên Tập Báo Văn Nghệ' (Interview Nguyễn Ngọc, the Editor of *Văn Nghệ*) in *Trăm Hoa vẫn Nở trên Quê Hương: Cao Trào Văn Nghệ Phản Kháng tại Việt Nam (1986-1989)* (One Hundred Flowers still Blossom in Homeland: The Movement of Literature of Resistance in Vietnam (1986-1989)). Reseda, CA: Lê Trần Publishing Company, 1990. P. 140-141.

⁸ According to FitzGerald, the Southern government even alienated itself from peasants. Peasants and the countryside were left impoverished whereas the development and the influx of foreign currency were concentrated in only the cities. See more in FitzGerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake*. London: Macmillan, 1972. Pp. 101-103.

tended to be restricted to urban areas. This is unlike the situation in the North where the Communist government required writers and artists to make field trips to the countryside, or even to live with rural masses. As Hoang Ngoc Thanh describes:

...in the literature in the South in general and in the novel in particular, the peasant is not adequately presented, written about. So far he does not get his fair share in literary production. One of the main reasons, as pointed out before, is that writers lead a city life, have not had enough experiences in the insecure countryside or they lose the few contacts with rural folks they might have once had.⁹

Gillian Beer makes an interesting remark that sometimes 'the representation' can be mistaken as 'the representative' of the studied object. As she explains:

We favour currently the word 'representation' because it sustains a needed distance between experience and formulation. It recognises the fictive in our understanding. It allows a gap between how we see things and how, potentially, they harden onto objects and so sustain themselves as real presences in the world. The objects may be books, pictures, films, advertisements, fashion...So representations rapidly shift from being secondary to being primary in their truth-claims. This speedy shift to claiming authority we can all observe, in others' practice and our own. Representations rapidly become representatives-those empowered to speak on behalf of their constituency: the authentic voices of a group.¹⁰

This study has tried to avoid falling into the same trap. It has no intention of claiming that the picture of peasants drawn in this study is definitive of Vietnamese peasants. Rather, it is an endeavour to examine the portrayal of Vietnamese peasants as represented and constructed in post-1975 Vietnamese literature.

The thesis will be divided into 5 chapters as follows:

⁹ Hoang Ngoc Thanh. *Vietnam's Social and Political Development as Seen through the Modern Vietnam*. New York: Peter Lang, 1991. P. 294.

¹⁰ Beer, Gillian, 'Re-presenting the Past' in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds.). *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. London: Macmillan Press, 1989. Pp. 63-64.

Chapter 1: Peasants and the Countryside in Vietnamese Literature prior to 1975

The first chapter concentrates on how peasants and the countryside are represented in Vietnamese literature before 1975. The discussion will move chronologically from traditional literature to modern literature prior to the end of the Vietnam-America War in 1975. It will describe the development of the role of peasants and the countryside in Vietnamese society, and how these are reflected in literary works. The changes and continuities in this literary corpus will also be discussed. The objective of this chapter is to provide a preparatory background and understanding for the following chapters, which deal with the representation of peasants and countryside in the post-1975 period.

Chapter 2: The Representation of Peasants in Post-1975 Literature

This chapter examines how the peasants are represented in post-1975 literature. It discusses the socio-political background of post-1975 Vietnam and its influences on the development of Vietnamese literature in general, and on the stories about peasants and the countryside in particular. After providing an overview of the literary scene in the post-1975 period, the chapter examines changes in the representations of peasants in the post-1975 period through the analysis of selected literary works.

Chapter 3: The Peasant Women

The third chapter deals with the portrayal of peasant women in post-1975 literature. It focuses on how peasant women are distinguished from women in other social classes, and, more specifically, how they are constructed and reflected in literature. The chapter is also aimed at examining how literature reflects the changes of the status of peasant women, within both the family and the political realm, through socio-political changes from war to peace. In turn, it highlights how peasant women became a source of inspiration for literary works in post-1975 period.

Chapter 4: The Countryside versus the City

This chapter illustrates how the conflict between the city and countryside is discussed in the post-war literature. This is an enduring theme in Vietnamese literature. It is not only the conflict between two settings, but also the debate about national cultural identity between village tradition and urban culture. The chapter also examines how literary works respond to the process of industrialisation, urbanisation and the introduction of the capitalist model of development.

Chapter 5: The Memory of the Land Reform

The final chapter will examine how the land reform programme in the 1950s is remembered and retold in literary texts written in the post-1975 period. The study will explore memories of land reform in the works of writers from different generations. This also includes the analysis of writers' experiences of the land reform, their political stances and their narratives.

These five chapters are followed by a summary, which draws conclusions from the study and discusses the likely direction and development of the topic in the future.

Chapter 1: The Representation of Peasants and the Countryside in Vietnamese Literature prior to 1975

Vietnamese people, mainly the peasants, created the history. They put the first bricks on the groundwork of culture in general, and on the base of literature in particular.

---Vũ Ngọc Phan---

This chapter seeks to explore how peasants and the countryside are represented in Vietnamese literature written in the pre-modern time until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, focusing on the change and continuity in themes, writers' attitudes towards the peasants, and the ways both peasants and the countryside are conveyed. The study is chronologically divided into four parts from classical to contemporary periods, and attempts to show that peasants are the focus of political debates as well as a source of inspiration for literary production. All the while, writers have played a significant role as mediators between the State and the peasants, using peasants as a means to express their concurrence with, or disagreement with, the policy of the State, and to express their disenchantment with the socio-political contexts within which they live. This chapter argues that the images of peasants and the representation of the countryside in Vietnamese literature prior to 1975 are closely connected to the military struggles and political debates of wartime.

1.1. Peasants in Pre-Modern Literature

In this part, we will discuss how peasants are portrayed in Vietnamese literature up to the late nineteenth century. The discussion will explore how peasants and the countryside are portrayed in popular literature, orally transmitted among rural people, and in classical literature, written in Chinese by officials and scholars.

Traditional Vietnamese society was made up of four classes: *sĩ* (scholars), *nông* (peasants), *công* (artisans) and *thương* (traders). Owing to the fact that the development of trade and commerce was limited, the two main classes were scholars and peasants. The former belonged to the ruling class while the latter were the ruled. In the social stratum, *sĩ* or scholars were ranked the highest and most prestigious. This

was due to the influence of Mencius's concept, which Vietnam adopted from China. After being ruled by the Chinese for a thousand years, Ngô Quyền, the founder of the Ngô dynasty, defeated the Chinese troops in 938 and established an independent nation that was nonetheless politically, socially and culturally modelled on the Chinese system. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese also followed Mencius's concept that '*those who labour with their mind rule those who labour with their physical strength*'.¹ This created discrimination, particularly against the peasants who made up the majority of the Vietnamese population. It is not, therefore, surprising that the dream of most male peasants was to pass the government examination to become mandarins or scholar officials. Being recruited to the State administration not only freed them from labour tasks, but also promoted their social status. The following paragraphs will discuss, through popular literature, peasants' views about social aspects and their relationship with other social classes.

1.1.1. Peasants in Popular Literature

Let us begin our discussion with popular literature, which includes proverbs and sayings (*tục ngữ*), folk songs (*ca dao* or *dân ca*), and folk tales (*truyện cổ tích*). Popular literature was created by ordinary people, mainly the peasants, and was orally passed on from generation to generation before being collected and written down by traditional scholars around the end of the eighteenth century.² Because it was composed by peasants, this popular form of literature tells the peasants' way of life and thinking, including their dreams, anxieties and anguish. Popular literature reflects two main aspects of peasants and the countryside: firstly agricultural production, covering activities in the rice fields, links with nature, and the hope of a better life; and secondly social relations, including those between husband and wife, family members, and people from different social layers. Here are some examples:

Production in the rice fields was mainly based on the labour of family members and relied entirely on nature, as reflected in the following folk songs:

I pray to Heaven: let rain fall,

¹ Tran Nhu Trang. *The Transformation of the Peasantry in North Vietnam*. PhD thesis. University of Pittsburgh, 1972. P. 81.

² Nguyễn Đình Hoà. *Vietnamese Literature: A Brief Survey*. California: San Diego State University, 1994. P. 13.

So I may have water to drink,
 A field to plough,
 A bowl of rice
 And some straw as fuel.³

The buffalo is regarded as a fellow worker or even as a member of a peasant family, sharing as it does the hard work in the rice fields with the peasants. This close relationship between peasant and buffalo continues in modern Vietnamese literature, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Buffalo! Let me tell you:
 Come out and help me plough the field.
 Plant and plough: the farmer's lot.
 Sweat and toil, you and I mind not.
 As long as there are rice ears
 Grass will be there for you to graze.⁴

Apart from the hard work, day after day, in rain or burning sun in the rice fields, the peasants had to endure natural disasters such as flood and typhoons. Moreover, they had to pay taxes to the government, leaving themselves sometimes without enough to eat. The following folk song describes how the peasants were worried about economic hardship:

When there is drought,
 When it rains intermitently;
 When there is a heavy typhoon,
 Three tenths of the crop are harvested!
 What to deliver to the government,
 What for family expenses, state requirements?
 What to pay the usual taxes,
 What to spend at the market for food?⁵

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ Hoang Ngoc Thanh. *Vietnam's Social and Political Development as Seen through the Modern Novel*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1991. P. 26.

Popular literature also reflects social relationships within both the village and broader society, such as love, marriage, the conflict between mother and daughter-in-law, or the discontent with the difference between social classes. For example, in the folksong below, a married woman expresses how she is unhappy with her husband:

When I lived with my parents,
They dearly loved and treated me like a flower.
From the day I come to stay with you,
You beat, you scold, and neglect me.
Bad clay should not be used to mould a pot,
You go and get a new wife, and I will get a new husband.⁶

The following folksong tells about the tension between peasants and scholars. Peasants play a vital role in economic life, but they are not as honoured as the learned people:

The first is a scholar, the second is a peasant
When the rice is running out, the scholar wanders around
Now the first is the peasant and the second is the scholar.

However, this would appear to be simply a sarcastic comment by peasants, in order to conceal their inferior feelings towards the scholars, for reality, most peasants wanted to enjoy similar high status and prestige as the scholars. In the following folk song, a wife is pleased to endure hard labour in order that her husband can study for, and pass, the examination to be a state official:

I am inside the house weaving
So you can study and have your name engraved on the gold tablet (of successful candidates)
This will bring honour to our ancestors
And compensation for your efforts as well as leaving behind our reputation for generation⁷

⁶ Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Tục Ngữ, Ca Dao, Dân Ca Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Proverbs and Folk Songs). The 11th edition. Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1998. P. 380.

⁷ Ngo Vinh Long. *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution: The French Colonial Period*. Massachusetts: Vietnam Resource Centre, 1974. P. 32.

The antagonistic feelings of the peasants towards the ruling class is also manifested in folk sayings, for example:

The son of a king would be a king,
The son of the poor would catch crabs in the field night and day.⁸

The son of a king would be a king,
The son of a temple watchman would sweep leaves.
When the peasants' uprising explodes,
The king's son will be in disgrace and live in a temple.⁹

The study of popular literature has been widely carried out since 1945 by scholars in the North, such as Vũ Ngọc Phan, Văn Tân and Nguyễn Đồng Chi, with the support of the Communist government. This is an attempt to replace classical culture, heavily influenced by Chinese civilisation, with folk culture, regarded as authentic culture.¹⁰ Class struggle became a major approach in understanding popular literature, especially in the 1950s when scholars and critics tended to look at peasants in a celebratory way: peasants are not just submissive and weak, but will fight with those who have oppressed them. The debate on the folk tale *The Story of Tấm and Cám* is a good example of the connection between the Marxist perspective and the study of Vietnamese folk literature.

In this tale, a young peasant girl, Tấm, is oppressed and killed by her wicked stepmother and Cám, her half-sister born of her stepmother. Because she had been a good person and grateful to her parents, Buddha gives life back to her and helps her become a queen. The story ends with a shocking details of her revenge. Tấm tricks Cám into jumping into hot water, in which she is cooked with salt and then sent to her stepmother to eat. Not knowing that it is her daughter's dead body, and thinking that

⁸ Vũ Ngọc Phan. *Tục Ngữ, Ca Dao, Dân Ca Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Proverbs and Folk Songs). P. 456.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

¹⁰ Pelly, Patricia Marie. *Writing Revolution: The New History in Post-Colonial Vietnam*. PhD thesis. Cornell University, 1993. Pp. 111-121.

it is a kind of meat, the stepmother eats it. After discovering the truth, she dies with remorse.¹¹

The Story of Tấm and Cám can simply be seen as the conflict between the good and the bad, but Vietnamese Marxist critics use it as a symbolic example of class oppression between the stepmother, the landowner, and Tấm, who represents the poor peasant class. During the period of class antagonism due to the land reform campaign in the 1950s, some academics even consented to the idea that the revenge in the story was acceptable. For example, here is the comment of a well-known scholar, Đinh Gia Khánh:

...Tấm would be nobler if she did not use that cruel method to punish bad people...but what else could we do? Furthermore, we should not, in fact we cannot, interfere in this revenge. Hostile feeling is so deep that Tấm could not act differently and the author of this folk tale might not want Tấm to choose a different way. We should have sympathy for the unfathomable hatred that the peasants had for the landowners.¹²

In recent years, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, a literary critic and scholar, called for change in the reading of this folk tale. For him, the hatred and vengeance in the story should not be considered as acceptable action.¹³ It is still an open question as to whether or not *The Story of Tấm and Cám* should be related to the issue of class struggle in Vietnamese countryside. However, what we can deduce from this folk story and folksongs mentioned earlier is that the tension between social classes in Vietnamese rural society is real, and this becomes an enduring theme in Vietnamese literature until the present time. Thus, it can be said that the hatred and antagonism among social classes dominating the content of twentieth-century Vietnamese literature is partly a continuity of the reaction against the social injustice clearly shown in the popular literature. Marxist concepts were brought into Vietnam and applied by Communist revolutionaries in the early twentieth century for certain purposes,

¹¹ Hữu Ngọc. *Sketches for a Portrait of Vietnamese culture*. Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishing House, 1998. Pp. 692-702. Also, another version of translation in Durand, Maurice and Nguyen Tran Huan. *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. Pp. 38-42.

¹² Đinh Gia Khánh, 'Về Truyện Tấm Cám' (About The Story of Tấm and Cám) in Bùi Mạnh Nhi (ed.). *Văn Học Dân Gian: Những Công Trình Nguyên Cứu* (The Folk Literature: Some Research Projects), Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1999. P.222.

¹³ Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, 'How to Read the Tale of Tấm and Cám in the Classroom' in *The Vietnam Review*, no. 2, spring-summer 1997. Pp.396-400.

however, class conflict did not come about due to external influences. It did, in fact, arise from enduring conflicts between social classes and groups within Vietnamese society.

Nevertheless, although the dissatisfaction of the peasants towards the ruling classes is clearly reflected in popular literature, it is more evidently represented in the literary works of the later periods, due to the influence of the Marxist concept of class struggle. As is seen, in folk tales and sayings, Vietnamese peasants longed for a chance to take revenge and rebel against those who exploited them, such as kings, mandarins and landowners. In the next part, we will see how peasants are portrayed in classical literature by Confucian scholars.

1.1.2. Peasants in Classical Literature

Despite the fact that the life and activities of peasants are vividly reflected in oral literature, peasants were never the main focus in the written literature that was mainly created by Confucian scholars. Peasants never appear as major characters in literature before the late nineteenth century. In order to discover why the peasants did not play a major role in literary works of the earlier periods, we need to understand the traditional concept of the literary convention of Vietnamese scholars. Traditionally, the literature of the learned scholars was written in Chinese and was dominated by the Confucian concept of '*văn dĩ tải đạo*', which literally means 'literature carries morality'. That is to say, the purpose of literature is to enhance morality. Owing to the fact that the majority of the population were illiterate, only the ruling class and the scholars, who were basically concerned about political stability and moral standards, were involved in literary activities. That is why literature almost completely excludes itself from the vernacular world, and why peasants and those belonging to the lower classes in society were not an inspiration for literature. Peasants featured only briefly in classical literature, appearing merely to support the main characters, normally kings, mandarins and scholars. As a result, Vietnamese literary works represented the social order and morality prescribed by the royal court. According to the Marxist perspective, '*the function of literature...is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling*

class.¹⁴ The writers of *Nôm* stories¹⁵ paid more attention to ordinary people. Even so, they did not allow peasants to have a major role in their works. Their main characters usually were poor students and countryside girls.¹⁶

However, the egalitarian concept, and the necessity of the peasants to both national defence and construction, allowed the voices of the peasants to be heard in literary works written in the late nineteenth century. The poetic oeuvre *Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc* (Funeral Oration for the Partisans of Cần Giuộc¹⁷), by the blind poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, rests on this assumption. It was the first work in which the peasants were depicted as main characters in Vietnamese written literature.¹⁸ Nguyễn Đình Chiểu praised the heroism and patriotism of the peasants, who had only bamboo pikes as weapon when fighting against foreign invaders. *Văn Tế* is a literary form used for writing a funeral oration and its content is mournful and moving. However, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu also employed this literary form to express his anger and disappointment that Confucian mandarins collaborated with foreign aggressors while ragged and unarmed peasants were brutally killed because of their patriotism.

Alas,
Never were you real soldiers
In battalions and drilled regiments
Experienced, trained in arts of war.
Simple peasant people of farms and villages,

¹⁴ Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Great Britain: Routledge, 1997. P. 5.

¹⁵ *Nôm* stories are written with the demotic script, which is an ideographic script used to transcribe Vietnamese language, while Hán or Chinese was the official language. The oldest text written by *Nôm* dates from the 14th century, but the script itself might have been created earlier than that. *Nôm* is regarded as a reaction to the domination of Chinese culture and civilisation. Literature in *Nôm* was highly developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly the works by Hồ Xuân Hương and Nguyễn Du.

¹⁶ Nguyễn Lộc. *Văn Học Việt Nam nửa cuối thế kỷ XVIII - hết thế kỷ XIX* (Vietnamese Literature from the Second Half of the Eighteenth to the End of the Nineteenth Century). 3rd edition. Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1999. P. 652. — *not part of Cochin province*

¹⁷ *Cần Giuộc* is now a part of Ho Chi Minh City, where on 14 December 1861 the violent battle between the French troops and ordinary Vietnamese peasants took place.

¹⁸ Prof. Hoàng Như Mai, a Ho Chi Minh city-based scholar in Vietnamese literature, argued that the peasants were never absent in classical literature. State-official scholars such as Nguyễn Trãi, Trần Hưng Đạo and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm included peasants in their works by referring to them with one general word 'dân' (people). According to Prof. Mai, these scholars implied the peasants when mentioning the people. Even so, the peasants are not the main focus of traditional writers. As remarked by Prof. Mai, *Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc* by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu is the first piece of literary work that has peasants as main characters. The author specifically used the word 'nông dân', which means peasant, to refer to his characters, instead of referring to them as 'the people'. Interview with Prof. Hoàng Như Mai in Ho Chi Minh city, February 2000.

Ardent for the good cause you right choose
 You made of yourselves guerrilla fighters.¹⁹

The literary critic Lê Ngọc Trà proposed that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's works constituted a turning point in Vietnamese literature, as this was the first time literature began to directly and openly take part in political affairs. For Lê Ngọc Trà, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was the first writer to shift from a didactic function of literature towards a political utility. This is the beginning of new literary practice in which authors deliberately participated in the nationalist movement by using literary texts to mobilise the force of the masses and propagate nationalist ideology.²⁰ This view is interesting and convincing because the representation of the peasants in literary works of the later periods, particularly between 1945-1975, share similarities with the portrayal of patriotic peasant characters in Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's *Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc*.

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's work was utilised as propaganda for nationalist movements. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether or not this late nineteenth-century poet really intended to create *Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc* for political purpose. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu is politically and socially conscious, but the emergence of peasants as main characters in his *Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc* may also be seen as the continuity of a literary trend which flourished in eighteenth century Nôm literature. Peasants had not yet become a literary motivation for Confucian scholars, but the aim of literary creativity inclined more towards ordinary people and deprived members of society. Due to disillusionment with the feudal monarchy and the decline of the royal court and mandarin system, the authors of Nôm literature, such as Hồ Xuân Hương and Nguyễn Du, turned more of their attention to ordinary people. The Southern poet, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, was presumably influenced by this literary trend, as shown in his famous funeral oration, which reflects not only the patriotism of the Cần Giuộc peasants, but also the disappointment in, and even disdain for, corrupted mandarins who were betraying their own country and cooperating with the French. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu focused on peasants whose brave action underscored the lack of efficacy of the king and his administration.

¹⁹ Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc. *Vietnamese Literature: Historical Background and Texts*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House. Pp. 408-409.

²⁰ Lê Ngọc Trà. *Lý Luận và Văn Học* (Theory and Literature) Ho Chi Minh City: NXB: Trẻ, 1990. Pp. 197-200.

Aside from Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Nguyễn Khuyến is another example of a scholar-official who reacted uncompromisingly to French domination. Having no interest in collaborating with the colonial government, Nguyễn Khuyến left his position at the royal court and returned to his home village where he farmed for a living. Other scholars, such as Nguyễn Thông, Nguyễn Xuân Ôn and Nguyễn Quang Bích, not only paid attention to peasants, but also expressed their respect for those peasants who were industrious and patriotic. At the same time, they became more concerned with how to improve the living standards of the rural masses. For instance, in the poem 'Chốn Quê' (Life in the Country), Nguyễn Khuyến unveiled the difficulties and misfortunes of the peasants.

A year's ploughing and burrowing end in loss
 Crops have failed-one, then another
 The little that is yielded goes:
 French tax, debt, labour all take a share.
 Buffalo hire consumes the rest
 My meals, morning and night, become salt and pickles
 No tea, no betel nut, bought when shopping
 Thrift, not rich, no gain at all!
 But thank heaven, the skeleton of my house and barn remain.²¹

As seen through the development of written literature, Confucian writers, in fact, recognised the existence of the peasants in society; however, the social context of traditional Vietnam did not allow scholars to ponder on the significance of people at the lower end of the social scale. As a result, peasants were merely characterised as the faceless masses, while the main roles in literature were normally preserved for the ruling classes and learned scholars. This characteristic continued until the late nineteenth century when Vietnam was exposed to a Western concept of egalitarianism and the idea of democracy. In addition, the fact that the royal court, as were as the country, was threatened by foreign troops made intellectuals realise for the first time that the survival of a nation could no longer rely on the ability of the king, but also

²¹ Tran My-Van. *A Vietnamese Scholar in Anguish: Nguyễn Khuyến and the Decline of the Confucian Order, 1884-1909*. Journal of Southeast Asian Studies Special Publications Series No. 2. Singapore: The National University of Singapore, 1992. P. 21.

needed the support of the people.²² As a result, both peasants and the countryside became an inspiration for literary production, and rural struggles were widely explored and discussed in literature.

1.2. Peasants in Transitional Literature

The period roughly between 1900 and 1930 is regarded as a transitional one for Vietnamese literature — from traditional to Modern literature.²³ Many aspects of Vietnam were modernised due to the arrival of Westernisation, including its political and educational systems. Two advantages of modernisation were the promotion of Romanised script, or Quốc Ngữ²⁴, printing technology and the birth of journalism. The Mandarin system was abolished in 1919 and this put an end to the traditional era and paved the way for the modern period.

During this transition, literary creativity passed from the Confucian scholars and mandarins into the hands of a new generation of writers, who had both received a Western education and were impressed by the Western concept of egalitarianism. These changes not only widened the literary sphere but also helped democratise attitudes towards literature. Literature could be for everybody, including those who belong to the lowest class in society. Writers paid more attention to the problems of daily life. This was unprecedented in Vietnamese literature because Confucian scholars traditionally wrote in order to underline moral principles and ensure that everybody followed the social norms. As shown in early twentieth-century literature, Vietnamese literature began to renounce its didactic function and move towards everyday problems and the basic concerns of ordinary people, such as poverty and famine.

²² Phong Lê, 'Vietnamese Literature in the Context of East-West Exchanges' in *Vietnamese Studies Review*, 1998. Pp. 77.

²³ The demarcation of the transitional period between tradition and modernity is an ambiguous one. It is not quite clear when Modern Vietnamese literature precisely began. It is argued that the modern period of Vietnamese literature was not completed until the foundation of the Self-Reliant Literary Group in 1932. However, Vietnamese scholars in general regarded the period approximately between 1900-1930 as a transition between the traditional and modern time.

²⁴ Quốc Ngữ, which is now the official language of Vietnam, came about due to the influence of western missionaries who came to propagate Christianity amongst Vietnamese people. Among them, Alexandre de Rhodes contributed greatly to the invention of the Romanised script. Quốc Ngữ was well established when French authorities abolished the Chinese civil service examination. The popularisation of Quốc Ngữ grew quickly because it was easier and more convenient to learn than Chinese characters.

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The growth of industrialisation and commercial enterprises under French domination not only affected the economic structure of colonial Vietnam, but also created new social classes, namely the bourgeoisie and the working class. The exploitation by the French regime caused many small land-owning farmers to become landless peasants, renting land from landlord peasants or working as labourers for the rich landowners. A great number of peasants were forced to leave their land and work in rubber plantations, which belonged mostly to the French investors and collaborators. The urban working class emerged in Vietnam in the early twentieth century due to the foundation of industrial enterprises, business companies and the construction of roads and railways under the colonial government.²⁵

Moreover, economic monopoly, the severe tax system, loss of crops and a decrease in rice prices caused widespread famine and poverty amongst Vietnamese people. Having been mobilised by a group of intellectual reformists, peasants began to react against the tax system. In 1908, those living in the central area of Vietnam demonstrated with the slogan '*Don't pay taxes to the French*'.²⁶ A larger and more widespread anti-tax movement was the Soviet-Nghệ-Tĩnh group, which was assisted by members of the Communist party. In 1930-31, peasants in the central region, notably in the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, demanded a reduction in tax. The economic impasse initiated antagonistic feelings against the foreign aggressors among the peasants and the workers. As the historian Buttinger writes, '*...by 1930, a great many peasants were ready to listen to any party whose leaders were willing to make the plight of the poor their chief concern*'.²⁷ The Indochinese Communist Party (Đảng Cộng Sản Đông Dương), established in 1930 and later ^{14 1951} renamed the Vietnamese Workers' Party, was probably the only political party at the time paying any attention to the peasants, who were fighting violently against the tax collectors, mandarins and village notables. The uprising was, however, severely repressed and thousands were arrested and imprisoned.²⁸

²⁵ Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc. *Vietnamese Literature: Historical Background and Texts*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House. Pp. 86-87.

²⁶ Mentioned by Peter Baugher in the Introduction of Phan Chu Trinh's writing. See more in Phan Chu Chinh. *A Complete Account of the Peasants' Uprising in the Central region*. Translated by Vu Ngu Chieu. Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1983. Pp. 16-17.

²⁷ Buttinger, Joseph. *Vietnam: A Political History*. USA: Andre Deutsch, 1968. P. 165.

²⁸ Popkin, Samuel L. *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*. California: University of California Press, 1979. P. xix.

Economic hardship and political disorder created negative feelings amongst poor Vietnamese people and others towards the French administration, and this is another reason why the literary trend turned towards those who were oppressed in society. Phan Cự Đệ, a literary professor and critic, asserted that Colonialism created a close relationship between intellectual writers and the peasants. The writers and the peasants shared both patriotism and hostility to the foreign invaders. When the nation was under foreign rule, Vietnamese people from all classes suffered equally.²⁹

The major writers in this transitional period, such as Phạm Duy Tốn and Hồ Biểu Chánh, attempted to portray the miseries of the peasants in their work. However, the depiction is limited only to the level of the conflict between the rich and poor in the countryside, or the effects of natural disasters. They did not openly criticise the French policy towards the peasants or refer to the peasant unrest. For example, Phạm Duy Tốn, in the short story *Sống Chết Mặc Bay* (Who Cares if You Survive or Die) [1918], describes how peasants are miserable due to a broken dyke, while the mandarin is spending his time gambling and ignoring all the sufferings being endured by villagers. The novel *Con Nhà Nghèo* (The Poor People) [1930], by Hồ Biểu Chánh, gives a realistic picture of the farmers and the countryside by depicting the difficult life of tenant peasants who are being unfairly treated by the landowners. However, Hồ Biểu Chánh focuses on the conflict between the rich and the poor, and that between good and evil. His story is based on the traditional plot in which good is rewarded and evil is punished.

1.3. The Rise of Peasants in Modern Literature (1936-1945)

During the Popular Front period (1936-1939)³⁰, the Indochinese Communist Party was allowed to carry out activities relatively freely, as the censorship of the Colonial state was less strict. As a result, the Communist Party took the opportunity to propagate Marxist ideology. The awareness of the contribution to be made by the peasants in building a socialist society is clearly expressed in the study *Vấn Đề Dân Cày* (The Peasant Question), which was first published in 1937 and written by Trường Chinh ✓

²⁹ Phan Cự Đệ. *Văn Học Việt Nam: Giai Đoạn Giao Thời 1900-1930* (Vietnamese Literature: Transitional Period 1900-1930). Hanoi: NXB Đại Học và Giáo Dục Chuyên Nghiệp, 1988. P. 56.

³⁰ The Popular Front Period (1936-1939) is the period when the French Communist Party formed the Government in France. At that time, the working class in European countries tried to be united with other social classes in order to resist Fascism. This was a good opportunity for the Vietnamese Communist Party to act more openly.

and Võ Nguyên Giáp. These two well-known Vietnamese revolutionaries presented a definition of 'peasantry' and a thorough study of the problems of the peasants and the countryside, and promised that the Communists would give them a better life and greater happiness.³¹ A number of writers at that time were significantly influenced by *Vấn Đề Dân Cày*, and impressed by the Marxist concept of social classes.

In this period, the peasants gained unprecedented attention in literature, from Realist and Romantic writers alike. It is also interesting to note that writing about peasants and the countryside became a kind of mode or competition for writers to prove themselves as competent. As Nguyễn Công Hoan noted in his memoir, Ngô Tất Tố decided to write *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light Is Out) after he saw Vũ Trọng Phụng had written the novel *Vỡ Đê* (Broken Dike).³² Ngô Tất Tố did not think that an urban-based writer like Vũ Trọng Phụng could write about the peasants and was confident that he knew more about peasants and their problems than did Vũ Trọng Phụng. As retold by Nguyễn Công Hoan, Ngô Tất Tố declared, '*How could Vũ Trọng Phụng*

³¹ It is indicated in this book that peasants are not considered as the proletariat because they earn a living by small production from their land. They are also owners of land, buffalo, and other tools. The status of the peasants is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The peasants are divided into five categories as below:

1) *Cố nông* or Landless Peasants

Cố nông are the peasants who do not have land, property or any tools for farming production. They earn a living by working on the land of the richer peasants who take advantage of their labour. This is why the *Cố nông* live in difficulty and their living standard is very low.

2) *Bần nông* or Poor Peasants

Bần nông are poor peasants. Although they own a small piece of land, they are unable to rely only on an income from it. After working on their own land, they are employed by the richer farmers in order to earn a small sum of extra money.

3) *Trung nông* or Middle Peasants

Trung nông are the peasants who own land and are able to live off it. They do not have to work for the richer peasants for extra income, but they are unable to hire any workers to work in their rice field either.

4) *Phú nông* or Rich Peasants

Phú nông are peasants who have a large piece of land. They have to employ workers because the land is too big for the labour of family members. Even though they themselves take part in working on the land, they exploit the labour of their employees.

5) *Địa chủ* or Landlords

Địa chủ are the landlords who hire workers for their land, and also rent pieces of land to the poor peasants. They themselves do not have to labour on the land. Their living and wealth comes from exploiting the labour of the poor peasants and workers, and making a profit on land rents. For more information see in Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp. *Vấn Đề Dân Cày* (The Peasant Question). 2nd edition. Hanoi: NXB Sự Thật, 1959.

³² It is a novel about the peasants by the short-lived writer Vũ Trọng Phụng. In this story, the peasants suffer from the flood. Moreover, they are forced to repair the broken dyke. Without wages and food, these poor peasants are exhausted and hungry. Phú, a young intellectual who was born in a peasant family, tries to persuade the peasants to strike. This novel was written in 1936, the same year he wrote *Giông Tố* (The Storms), which is also about the oppression of the peasants.

write about the peasants? Let me write a story for an example'.³³ Then, he wrote *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light Is Out), which is regarded as a classic story about peasants in the colonial period.

The following section is a discussion of literary works dealing with peasants and the countryside during this period, including the masterpieces of Ngô Tất Tố, Nguyễn Công Hoan and Vũ Trọng Phụng.

1.3.1. Peasants in Realist Literature

The short novel *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light is Out) by the Confucian scholar Ngô Tất Tố (1894-1954) was first published in 1937. The timeframe of the story is the four oppressive days of a tax-collecting campaign, during which the peasants, suffering from food deprivation, have to struggle to find money to pay the tax, or what the author calls '*món nợ nhà nước*' (the debt owed to the government). Those who fails to do so are brutally beaten by government officials and soldiers. Chị Dậu, the main character of the novel, has to sell her dogs, and her eldest child, and finally becomes a wet-nurse for the child of a wealthy family. Even so, she still does not have enough money to pay the tax. The author condemns the oppressive tactics of both local mandarins and the French colonialists, who are characterised as bad, miserly and merciless. Although the author does not directly criticise the French, he hints that all the miseries that the poor peasants have to endure are caused by the Colonial state. For example, Chị Dậu is surprised when she is asked to pay tax for her dead brother-in-law. When querying it with the tax collector, she receives this reply: '*You just go to ask Ông Tây, I don't know*'.³⁴ Ông Tây literally means 'the Western man', and here it is quite clear that the author is referring to the French.

Frustrated by being colonised by foreigners, Vietnamese writers used the oppression of the peasants by local officials and the French administration as a means to ask for rights and democracy from the Colonial government. As Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, a literary professor and critic, commented, '*In a Colonial country like Vietnam, the*

³³ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời Viết Văn của Tôi* (My Literary Life). Ho Chi Minh city: NXB Văn Nghệ, 1996. P. 226.

³⁴ Ngô Tất Tố. *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light is Out). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1998. P. 87.

*agrarian question is the fundamental content of the problems relating to democracy.*³⁵

Ngô Tất Tố, as a Confucian scholar, used the conflict between good and evil as a main focus in his novel, and his characters are flat, black and white stereotypes. At the same time, he discovered the good characteristics of the peasants. Even though they were poor, they did not - unlike the rich but selfish mandarins or landlords - hesitate to help each other, even during the hardest of times. As Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh pointed out, *'In the stream of the Realist literature before the August Revolution, there is no writer who profoundly understands and knows how to respect the peasants like Ngô Tất Tố.'*³⁶ Even though the author believed in the good nature of the peasants, he did not see any future for them. Ngô Tất Tố ended the story with the scene in which Chị Dậu ran away from the house of the mandarin where she worked as a wet-nurse, because her employee tried to sexually harass her. The author finishes the novel with the sentence: *'The sky is as dark as black ink and her future as well.'*³⁷

Unlike *Tắt Đèn*, Nguyễn Công Hoan's novel, *Bước Đường Cùng* (Impasse), written in 1938, is not based on the conflict between good and bad. Rather, this novel is constructed on the concept of the class struggle, and Nguyễn Công Hoan (1903-1977) reveals how poor peasants are oppressed by the landlords. It is shown in the novel that the landlord tries to steal the land from the poor peasants. Taking advantage of their illiteracy and ignorance, the landlords trick the peasants by exaggerating the amount of money lent to the peasants and charging a high interest. Nguyễn Công Hoan asserts that the only thing the peasants can do in order to survive such oppression is to fight against the wicked landlords and join the revolution.³⁸ However, Nguyễn Công Hoan ends his story by portraying the hopelessness of Anh Pha who finally has to leave his home village.

It is obvious that Nguyễn Công Hoan was influenced by the Marxist idea of class liberation. Compared to the Confucian scholar, Ngô Tất Tố, his understanding and his sympathy for the peasants were limited and superficial. He saw them only as pathetic

³⁵ Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh. *Con Đường Đi vào Thế Giới Nghệ Thuật của Nhà Văn* (The Road towards the Artistic World of the Writers). 2nd edition. Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1996. P. 70.

³⁶ Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, "Tắt Đèn của Ngô Tất Tố" ("Tắt Đèn by Ngô Tất Tố") in *Ngô Tất Tố: Về Tác Giả và Tác Phẩm* (Ngô Tất Tố: the Author and His Works). Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 2000. P.270.

³⁷ Ngô Tất Tố. *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light is Out). P. 165.

³⁸ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Bước Đường Cùng* (Impasse). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1984.

miserable folk. Although Nguyễn Công Hoan may have felt sorry for the peasants, it is unlikely that he admired them. This is demonstrated by the way he describes them as backward, ignorant and superstitious, whereas Ngô Tất Tố emphasises the kind-heartedness and morality of the people in the countryside.

One of the most famous Vietnamese short stories, *Chí Phèo* (named after the protagonist in the story), written in 1941 by Nam Cao (1917-1951), shows that the hardest thing for the peasants to bear is not poverty or hunger, but the loss of human dignity. While Chí Dâu in *Tắt Đèn* has to sell sweet potatoes, dogs, or even her daughter in order to have sufficient money to pay the tax, the landless peasant Chí Phèo has to give up being a good person and start living a criminal life in order to survive. He becomes a lackey of Bá Kiến and is ready to carry out whatever he is assigned - his main job being to threaten his master's debtors, and to beat or even kill those who are against Bá Kiến. The Vũ Đại villagers became more and more terrified of him, until nobody dares to talk to him. All the money he earns is spent on alcohol, and he gets drunk because it enables him to forget his loneliness. It seems, in the end, that the only way that the poor peasant could free himself from the poverty, loneliness and humiliation he had undergone is to take revenge on his foe. He stabs Bá Kiến, and then himself.

The novel *Giông Tố* (The Storm) [1937], by Vũ Trọng Phụng, highlights the fact that the oppressors of the peasants in the colonial society are not only local mandarins, but also the rich bourgeois who emerged amid the growth of capitalism introduced by French traders. *Giông Tố* begins with the scene in which Mịch, a peasant girl, is raped by Nghị Hách, a millionaire and a member of the Chamber of Representatives of Tonkin.³⁹ The father of the girl tries to bring a lawsuit against Nghị Hách, but it seems that everything has to yield to the power and money of Nghị Hách. The writer, Vũ Trọng Phụng, was pessimistic about the future of the peasants. For him, they were a cowardly and stupid crowd who did not know how to defend themselves from the mighty intimidators, like Nghị Hách, let alone to fight back.

It should be noted that the hatred that Vũ Trọng Phụng had for rich landowners and entrepreneurs was based on a yearning for social justice, rather than any Marxist

³⁹ In the colonial period, Vietnam was divided into three parts, Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China.

concept of class struggle. It is evident that Vũ Trọng Phụng himself was not clear about Communism. He might have heard about some Communist activists, but his understanding of the ideology was limited. For example, he described Hải Vân, a Communist activist, as a man who has special power to foresee the future. This may have sounded superstitious to the Communists. In fact, it seems that, apart from Nguyễn Công Hoan, who was acquainted with the members of the Communist party,⁴⁰ Vietnamese writers of this period were not yet familiar with the idea of class struggle although they were dissatisfied with social injustice. Therefore, they spontaneously wrote about the miseries of the peasants and condemned the exploitation of the ruling class and landlords.

Apart from portraying the life of deprivation of the peasants, the writers also tried to explore how the morality of the peasants deteriorated in the socio-political changes such as in *Bỉ Vỏ* (A Pickpocket), by Nguyễn Hồng, which won a literary prize in 1937. In this novel, Bính, a simple-minded peasant girl, is seduced by a man from the city and she becomes pregnant. After she gives birth to her son, Bính finally decides to leave the village and head for Hải Phòng city. Because of her naivety, she becomes a prostitute and a pickpocket. Nguyễn Hồng tried to illustrate the social problems which were arising from the growth of industrialisation and urban expansion.

The hunger and starvation suffered by the peasants in the Colonial period, and in particular during the great famine⁴¹ caused by the Franco-Japanese conflict which ended in 1945, are also reflected in literary works.⁴² Ngô Tất Tố describes in his reportage entitled *Làm No* (To Be Full), also known as *Cái Ăn trong Những Ngày Nước Ngập* (Food in the Days of Flood) [1938] that poor peasants had to eat clay and water hyacinth in order to stay alive.⁴³ Like most of his contemporaries, Ngô Tất Tố depicts hunger as the main hardship of the peasants. The writers believed that the problems of the peasants were mainly related to material things, such as poverty and

⁴⁰ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời Viết Văn của Tôi* (My Literary Life). Pp. 218-219.

⁴¹ In the winter of 1945 alone about two million peasants in northern Vietnam died of starvation. Noted in O'Harrow, Stephen, 'Vietnamese Women and Confucianism: Creating Spaces from Patriarchy' in Karim, Wazir Jahan (ed.) *'Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995. P. 164. And also in Nguyễn Thế Anh, 'The great Famine of 1945' in *The Vietnam Review*, no. 4, spring-summer 1998. Pp. 462-472.

⁴² A thorough study of this account is Ngô Vinh Long. *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French*. New York: Columbia Press, 1991. Pp.121-135.

⁴³ The story is reprinted in Phạm Trọng Thường et al. (eds.). *Phóng Sự Việt Nam 1932-1945*. Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 2000. Pp.35-43.

food shortage. One writer who perceived the link between the peasants and starvation in a different way was Nam Cao. For him, hunger and starvation not only caused the peasants to suffer, but also inflicted a loss of human dignity. In his well-known short story, *Một Bữa No* (A Full Meal) [1943], an old peasant woman, too old to earn a living by herself, has her granddaughter adopted by a rich family, and is made to tolerate insults and humiliation in exchange for a full meal. Nam Cao shows that poverty and starvation were not all the peasants had to endure, for they were also subjected to psychological degradation.

1.3.2. Peasants in Romantic Literature

From 1932 to 1935, the writers of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliance Literary Group)⁴⁴ paid considerable attention to the emancipation of women and the problems of urban people. This is not surprising because many of the group were from middle-class families. In *Phong Hoá* (Mores), the farmer, through a cartoon character Lý Toét, was characterised as a symbol of backwardness and was allergic to modern civilisation. However, in the Popular Front period, they switched to peasants and problems in the countryside.

The influence of this literary trend on Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliance Literary group) is seen not only through their literary works but also through their social activities. On 16 August 1937, Hội ánh Sáng (The Bright Association), presided over by Nhất Linh, the leader of the group, was established to help improve the living standards of countryside people, especially in terms of housing and hygiene. The purpose of the association was *'to change society which is our ideal, a reason that*

⁴⁴ Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliant Literary Group) was officially formed in 1933 by young writers with a Western education. The major members of the group were Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, Hoàng Đạo and Thạch Lam. Their main aims are to support the new, to liberate women from arranged marriage and Confucian concepts, and to protect the individual right to happiness. They obviously denied the old values of Confucian society and tried to modernise Vietnamese society in a Western way. For more than forty years after the August Revolution 1945, Tự Lực Văn Đoàn's writings and polemics were regarded as selfish and reactionary due to their background, and literary and political attitudes. That is to say, the pursuit of individualism initiated by Tự Lực Văn Đoàn seems incompatible with the national resistance which requires the spirit of the group and collectivity. Moreover, some members of the group participated in the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng) founded by the group of patriotic intellectuals and middle-class people. It is not until after the Đổi Mới policy was implemented in 1986 that the works of the so-called 'bourgeois Romantic writers' are reassessed. It is generally accepted that Tự Lực Văn Đoàn's contribution to the Romantic Movement and the process of modernisation of Vietnamese literature in the early decade of 1930 is undeniable.

*makes us cheerful, and an inspiration of life.*⁴⁵ The problems of both peasants and the countryside were discussed in the study *Bùn Lầy Nước Động* (The Mud and Stagnant Water) [1938] by Hoàng Đạo; however, the booklet was confiscated by the French government after it was published.⁴⁶ In it, Hoàng Đạo proposed reforms in the countryside to the French administration, for example, education of the peasants and abolition of backward habits and superstitions. He criticised the policies of the colonial administration, such as the tax system, and the fact that the colonial administration's monopoly of products, such as salt and alcohol, caused misery for the peasants.

The members of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliance Literary group) idealised and romanticised peasants and the countryside in novels, such as *Con Đường Sáng* (The Bright Direction) [1937] by Hoàng Đạo and *Gia Đình* (Family) [1936] by Khái Hưng. In *Con Đường Sáng*, Duy the main character is kind and helpful to the poor farmers and attempts to improve their living standards. The aim of Duy, the young landlord with progressive ideas, is 'to soothe the pain of the peasants, take those people whose life is full of tragedies to a peaceful place.'⁴⁷ The couple, Hạc and Bảo, in *Gia Đình* (Family)⁴⁸ also work and help the poor peasants in the plantation. Due to living in the countryside and working among the farmers, their family was happy as well as physically healthy, whereas the couple, An and Nga, could not find any peace in life after An decided to become a mandarin. The main focus of Khái Hưng is to criticise the mandarin system for being corrupt and old-fashioned. As is shown in the story, the system could turn an honest man like An into a corrupt mandarin who accepts bribes. The first time An accepts the bribes, he feels ashamed, but gradually he becomes more and more familiar and comfortable with them.

⁴⁵ Nguyễn Tường Tam, 'Ý Nghĩa Xã Hội của Ánh Sáng' (The Social Meaning of the Ánh Sáng) in *13 Năm Tranh Luận Văn Học* (13 years of Literary Debate). Vol. 3, Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Văn Học, 1995. Pp. 518-528. The text was presented at the first meeting of the association on 16 August 1937. It was first published in *Ngày Nay* no. 74(29-8-1937) p. 69.

⁴⁶ Ngô Vinh Long commented that the book was banned because it was written in a non-fictional form. Compared to the critiques of peasants' lives in novels and short stories in the same period, the content of this book is rather mild. For Ngô Vinh Long, this reflected the censors' attitudes towards non-fiction and fiction. In the preface of *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution: The French Colonial Period*, 1974.

⁴⁷ Hoàng Đạo. *Con Đường Sáng* (The Bright Direction) in *Tuyển tập Tự Lực Văn Đoàn tập 1* (Collection of works by the Self-Reliance Literary Group) Vol.1. Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1998. It was first published in *Ngày Nay* in 1938-1939.

⁴⁸ Khái Hưng. *Gia Đình* (Family) reprinted in *Tuyển tập Tự Lực Văn Đoàn tập 1* (Collection of works by The Self-Reliance Literary Group. Vol.1. Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1998. It is first published in *Ngày Nay* in 1936.

In the works by these middle-class writers, ordinary peasants still are not allowed to be main characters, or they can be only after they are educated. The main characters in both *Con Đường Sáng* (The Bright Direction) and *Gia Đình* (Family) originate from farming families and live in the countryside but they belong to wealthy families. They are children of landlords, Confucian scholars or even retired mandarins. Both Khái Hưng and Hoàng Đạo tried to polish and intellectualise their characters, for example, both An and Duy, although from the countryside, went to French schools. As shown in both novels, the main characters go to the countryside in order to search for happiness and a peaceful life because they are tired of the dissipating life and hypocrisy of the mandarins and people in the city.

Among the members of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliance Literary group), Trần Tiêu presented a more realistic picture of the countryside. He concentrated on portraying the daily life of the peasants, including their various relationships. His works also tell us about the dream of the peasants to achieve a prosperous life. For example, in the novel *Con Trâu* (The Buffalo) [1938], Chánh, the protagonist, dreams of having a buffalo because it would help alleviate the fatigue of his family members. Unfortunately, his dream is not achieved until he dies. The hope of the peasants and their relation to nature and buffalo, as shown in the novel, resonates with what is reflected in the folk songs.

Hội ánh Sáng and the attempts to reform the countryside shown in the works by the writers of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliance Literary group) were regarded as '*cải lương tư sản*' (the Bourgeois Reform) by Communist critics such as Phan Cự Đệ.⁴⁹ The solutions to the problems of peasants and the countryside suggested by the urban-based writers of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn tend to be romantic. These middle-class authors wanted to reform the countryside culturally, rather than politically, and they were reluctant to take political action against the colonial government. Even those who are critical about their political standpoint and question their social commitment have to accept that their sympathy towards their rural fellows is genuine.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Phan Cự Đệ, 'Tự Lực Văn Đoàn' in *Văn Học Việt Nam 1900-1945* (Vietnamese Literature 1900-1945). 2nd edition. NXBGiáo Dục, 1998. Pp. 529-556.

⁵⁰ For example, Phan Cự Đệ. *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn: Con Người và Văn Chương* (The Self-Reliant Literary Group: Its Members and Literature). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1990. Pp. 21-22.

In summary, the peasants are portrayed in the literature of this period as the object of victimisation by feudal landlords and colonial administration. The realist writers wrote about these rural masses in order to criticise the French regime and local officials who caused suffering and deterioration, both economically and morally. As regards the romantic authors, their idealistic attempt to improve the living conditions of the peasants and to modernise the countryside helped them escape from the unpleasant reality of the growing urban city where they lived. Most writers normally gave their stories tragic endings and the peasants are usually described as weak and helpless before their enemies. Although these writers' kind thoughts for the peasants were sincere, the gloomy days of the Colonial regime did not allow them to find a solution for the problems of the countryside people, or for national salvation. In such a hopeless situation, these writers were pessimistic about the future of the peasants in the same way that they did not have any hope for themselves and society.

1.4. Peasants in Socialist Realist Literature

Why should they be expected to do so?

After the August Revolution⁵¹ and the declaration of independence by Hồ Chí Minh in September 1945, there was no more debate between 'art for art's sake' and 'art for life' which was the literary debate that had prevailed in the 1930s⁵². This is because the writers began, after the Communists took control from the French, to believe that the concept of collectivism could provide a solution for the survival of the country. Some writers, though, did not really believe in collectivism, but finally they were forced to conform to the Marxist view towards art and literature. Moreover, the return of the French troops in 1946 made intellectuals, writers and artists, whether or not they regarded themselves as Communists, realise that the revolutionary task was their first priority. Whether they were willing or not, they had to give up their admiration of individualism and join the struggle of the collective masses in order to gain national independence.

Under the rule of the Communist government, '*cái tôi*' or the '*I / Individuality*' was not allowed in literature, and was gradually surpassed by '*cái ta*' or the '*We*'

⁵¹ In 1945, the Vietnamese Communists defeated the French troops in Hanoi on 19 August, in Huế on 23 August and in Saigon on 25 August.

⁵² A useful reference for this literary debate is Hue Tam Ho Tai, 'Literature for the People: From Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics' in Truong Buu Lam (ed.), *Borrowings and adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*. Southeast Asia Paper No. 25. Centre for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1987. Pp. 63-83.

Collectivism'. It is assumed that only '*cái ta*' could lead Vietnam towards victory against foreign troops and was beneficial for the development of Socialism, whereas '*cái tôi*' was regarded as a main obstacle to the progress of the nation. As seen in the critical writing of Văn Tân and Nguyễn Hồng Phong, intellectuals in general, and writers in particular, were required to transform the '*bourgeois self*' into the '*proletariat self*'.⁵³ In the article '*Nâng Cao Đạo Đức Cách Mạng, Sạch Chủ Nghĩa Cá Nhân*' (To Increase Morality of Revolution, To Wipe Out Individualism), Hồ Chí Minh severely criticised individualism. He stated that the morality of the revolution was '*tư tưởng tập thể*' (collectivism), '*đoàn kết*' (unity), '*tổ chức*' (organisation and '*kỷ luật*' (discipline). Individualism needed to be eliminated because it was disadvantageous to the revolution. In his writing, he asked Vietnamese people to keep in mind '*mình vì mọi người*' (one for all) in order that Vietnam could achieve the victory.⁵⁴

Consequently, Vietnamese writers had to participate in political affairs and their works were used as propaganda and as part of mass mobilisation. They were not allowed to write about themselves and pursue personal dreams, but were required instead to stimulate (*cổ vũ*) people to make a greater effort and contribution to the survival of the nation. The essay *Nhận Đường* (Recognised the Path) by the famous writer, Nguyễn Đình Thi, can be regarded as a manifesto for the writers of this period. Nguyễn Đình Thi pointed out that the responsibility of writers to the fatherland was unavoidable and that it was necessary for literature to unite people and strengthen their souls in order that they might overcome the odds and win the battle. As he wrote:

...The sound of the war exploded. Our direction is very clear: everything for the struggle, everything for the nation...we will turn everything to the flag of

reaction to NV61-affair!

⁵³ Văn Tân and Nguyễn Hồng Phong. *Chống Quan Điểm phi Vô Sản về Văn Nghệ và Chính Trị* (Fighting against Non-proletariat Attitude in Art and politics). Hanoi, NXB Sự Thật, 1957. Pp. 54-55.

⁵⁴ Hồ Chí Minh, '*Nâng Cao Đạo Đức Cách Mạng, Sạch Chủ Nghĩa Cá Nhân*' (To Increase Morality of Revolution, To Wipe Out Individualism) in *Hồ Chí Minh: Collected Works*. Vol. 11. Hanoi: NXB Chính trị quốc gia, 1996. Pp. 438-439. The article was written for the 39th anniversary of the foundation of the Communist Party on 3 February 1969.

the nation; to write, to draw pictures, to compose music, to fight on a literary front. Every creation is a bullet shooting to the head of enemy.⁵⁵

However, conflict took place when the Communist revolutionary group with which intellectuals, writers and artists had been associated became a Communist government. Similar to most Communist states, the government in Vietnam tried to control literary production and intellectual life. This attempt to turn literature into a political tool reflects the principles of '*party literature*' laid down by Lenin. That is:

Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organised, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.⁵⁶

X Similarly, the Vietnamese leaders were, to a great extent, aware of the significance of art and literature. The Communist government controlled and regulated literary activities, as is seen in *Đề Cương Văn Hoá Việt Nam 1943* (Vietnamese Cultural Theses, in 1943)⁵⁷ by the Communist leader, Trường Chinh. In brief, three principles are outlined for the writers and cultural labourers to follow. The first principle is '*dân tộc hoá*', to nationalise and to fight against the influence of Colonial culture. The second is '*dại chúng hoá*' or popularisation which requires cultural activities to be connected to the interests of people. The final principle is '*khoa học hoá*' or to 'make scientific', which relates to dialectic thinking. Trường Chinh clearly suggests in *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, published in 1948, that Socialist Realism⁵⁸ is a recommended literary style of writing for Vietnamese writers.

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Đình Thi, 'Nhận Đường' (Recognised the Path) in Mã Giang Lân. *Văn Học Việt Nam 1945-1954* (Vietnamese Literature 1945-1954). Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998. P.191. Nguyễn Đình Thi wrote this essay in 1947.

⁵⁶ Lenin, V.I., 'Party Organisation and Party Literature' in *On Literature and Art*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970. P. 23.

⁵⁷ Trường Chinh. 'Đề Cương Văn Hoá Việt Nam 1943' (Vietnamese Cultural Theses 1943) in *Về Sự Lãnh Đạo của Đảng trên Mặt Trận Tư Tưởng và Văn Hoá 1930-1945* (About the Leadership of the Party on Ideology and Culture 1930-1945). Hanoi: NXB Sự Thật, 1960. Pp. 182-187.

⁵⁸ Socialist Realism is the literary style of writing practised in Socialist regimes since the early twentieth century, despite harsh criticism and denunciation from literary critics in general and authors in particular. In Vietnam, it was recommended in *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* [1948] by the Communist leader, Trường Chinh, as an official style of writing. It was discovered in 1932 and attributed to Stalin, but nobody knows exactly the origin of this discourse. As some experts in Russian literature said, Socialist Realism is a problematic term. That is to say, there is no clarification of the

From this time, the tension increased between the state and writers. Intellectuals and writers began to be disillusioned by Communist ideology. Under a Communist umbrella, writers tried from time to time to react against party control over literature, such as in the case of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair⁵⁹. A good example of the attack on the party's strict discipline over intellectual training and literary creativity is deliberately woven into the short story *Ông Năm Chuột* (Mr. Năm Chuột) by Phan Khôi. The narrator, a young scholar, tells us how he got to know Mr. Năm Chuột, a gifted but artful goldsmith. The author implies through a conversation between the young learned man and the goldsmith, that people should learn not to interfere in the affairs of others. Similarly, politics should not intrude into the literary domain, as is shown through the character of Mr. Năm Chuột:

Since I learned that Mr. Năm Chuột knows Chinese and reads poetry, I sometimes tried to talk with him about literature. He only listened, but never showed any opinion. When I complained, he explained, 'for the subject we know very little, should only listen, and not speak. I don't talk about literature with you in the same way that you shouldn't teach me how to be a goldsmith'.⁶⁰

The Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair ended with suppression, and writers realised it was too costly to challenge the regime. In addition, the limited conditions of the wartime period and political situations did not allow literature to develop in its own way. Dogmatic guidelines were laid down by the party in order to ensure ideological control over intellectuals in general, and writers in particular. For this reason, literature put aside its aesthetic pursuit and participated in the war and political affairs.

term or whether it is an attempt to reformulate what is already present or what has already been said. Even though it is quite difficult to find the exact definition of Socialist Realism, the main characteristics of this literary style of writing can be summarised from a discussion at the Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: Anti-Pessimism, anti-individualism, objective truth or specific truth, typification of heroes and myth making. See more in Brown, Edward J. *Russian Literature since the Revolution*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982 and Robin, Regime. *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*. Translated by Catharine Porter. California: Stanford University Press, 1992.

⁵⁹ This is the intellectual dissidence named after the two short-lived journals *Nhân Văn* (Humanism) and *Giai Phẩm* (Works of Beauty) which were printed in 1956-1958. The group of intellectuals and writers demanded freedom of expression and reacted to the strict guidelines of the party. The participants and sympathisers of the movement had to endure suppression and harsh criticism.

⁶⁰ Phan Khôi, 'Ông Năm Chuột' (Mr. Năm Chuột) in *Trăm Hoa Đưa Nở Trên Đất Bắc* (One Hundred Flowers Blossom in the North). Paris: Quê Mẹ, 1983. P.88. The short story is first printed in *Văn* (Literature) no. 36, 10-1-1958.

reference?

Artists and writers were not only '*nghệ sĩ*' (artists) but they had to play the role of '*chiến sĩ*' (fighters) too. Writers were forced to take part in promoting political propaganda and mobilising the masses. Moreover, the wartime situation required a more utilitarian function of art and literature. That is why literature was also regarded as a '*mặt trận*' (battle front), apart from military, political and economic fronts, and as a weapon for fighting for victory of the nation. As the Communist leader Phạm Văn Đồng pointed out, '*In ideological struggle, art is really a sharp weapon because its effect is very deep and lasts very long*'.⁶¹ The necessity of literature to take part in the national struggle was confirmed by Nguyễn Đình Thi, the leader of several literary organisations. He said this in an interview:

For us a book is a weapon. Our readers know how to use a jungle knife, a hand grenade. They want to have the same trust in what a book says as in their weapons. Writing must support them and strengthen them, must offer them explanations, a point of view. We have founded no literary school. We have no time for experimenting with form, with visionary new literary creations...our literature is intended to be political, to have a practical application.⁶²

Thus, it is not surprising when Nguyễn Công Hoan asserts that his writing is based on the formula: '*art is politics and politics is art. Art is the form, and politics is the content. Art is a form to convey political meaning*'.⁶³ In other words, the main purpose of literature between 1945 and 1975 was to serve politics.

The literature on peasants and the countryside also reflects the relationship between the state, writers and the peasants, when writers were required to celebrate the patriotism and good virtues of peasants for the national cause because the revolution had to depend on the mobilisation of peasants. In 1952, Hồ Chí Minh called for support from peasants:

Ricefields are battleground,
Plough and hoe are weapons,

⁶¹ Phạm Văn Đồng. *Tổ quốc Ta, Nhân Dân Ta, Sự Nghiệp Ta và Người Nghệ Sĩ* (Our Nation, Our People, Our Cause and the Artist). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1969, P. 99.

⁶² Weiss, Peter. *Notes on the Cultural Life of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*. London: Calder&Boyars, 1971. Pp. 70-71.

⁶³ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời Viết Văn của Tôi* (My Literary Life). P. 417.

Peasants are fighters,
Home and the front work together.⁶⁴

Like the literature of the Confucian scholars in the traditional period, the 1945-1975 literature tries to underline social order and strengthen the morality of the socialist state. It shares the nation's aim of achieving independence, and despite copious stories on peasants and the countryside, the writers did not speak for the peasants and their problems. In fact, the writers spoke for the state. Throughout the Socialist Realist literature, writers celebrate peasants for their contribution to the revolutionary tasks. Peasants' tradition of being rebellious and fighting against foreign aggressors is highlighted because it is an essential factor for the victory of national struggle. However, writers never hesitate to criticise peasants for being reactionary if they do not follow or agree with the government policy. Examples of this remark are demonstrated in the following paragraphs.

1.4.1. Peasants as the Masters of the Revolution

Vietnamese Communist leaders realised that the revolution would not be successful without the support of the peasants. Writers and artists were encouraged to regard peasants and the countryside as the centre of their creativity. In a letter sent to artists in 1951, Hồ Chí Minh clearly stated that *'The artists and writers unavoidably have responsibility to serve the war, the nation and people, first of all are công (workers), nông (peasants), binh (soldiers).'*⁶⁵ This is because soldiers played a vital role in fighting against foreign troops, workers were regarded as the most progressive class in socialist society, and farmers were considered as good allies of the proletariat in building a socialist country.

This recalls the literary practice in China that was significantly influenced by Mao Tse-Tung's 'Talks on Literature and Art' at Yen-an in May 1942. The guidelines launched by Mao Tse-Tung shows the effort of the Chinese government not only to control literature and art, but also to subordinate literature and art to politics.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Bùi Đình Thanh. *20 Năm Nước Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng Hoà* (20 Years of Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Hanoi: NXB Khoa học, 1966. P. 83.

⁶⁵ A letter Hồ Chí Minh sent to artists at the art exhibition in 1951. The letter is dated 10 December 1951. Reprinted in Mã Giang Lân. *Văn Học Việt Nam 1945-1954* (Vietnamese Literature 1945-1954). Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998. Pp. 189-190.

Chairman Mao stated that there were four main problems with literary creativity. The first problem was that of 'class stand'. He required writers and artists to take a stand on the proletariat and the masses. The second one was the problem of 'attitude'. Writers and artists should follow and develop a specific attitude to revolution and not try to go the opposite way. The third problem he mentioned was that of 'audience'. The audience of artistic and literary works were workers, peasants, soldiers and revolutionary cadres. Therefore, it was the duty of writers and artists to understand these people, and to write in a language and style that they understood. The subject of 'study' was the fourth problem with which Mao was concerned, urging revolutionary writers and artists to study Marxism-Leninism.⁶⁶

The short story Đôi Mắt (A Pair of Eyes) [1948] by Nam Cao raised the issue of intellectuals' viewpoints regarding peasants. It is also a turning point in writing about the peasants in Vietnamese literature for its attempt to change intellectuals and writers' attitudes towards the peasants. In this story, peasants are no longer victims of society, but are considered the masters of the revolution and the creators of history. The message in the story is aimed directly at writers, as the author tries to remind his colleagues that the survival of the nation relies on the contribution of the peasants. As is shown in the representation of peasants in Vietnamese literature as a whole, the writers might have sympathy for the peasants, but it is difficult for them to consider the rural masses as reliable, important or respectable. Nam Cao points out that a writer needs to believe in the force of the peasants and work together with them for the national cause. The narrator criticises any writer who regards himself or herself as superior to the peasants, as well as those who try to distance themselves from the masses. As the narrator of the story says to his friend:

You are used to perceiving life and human beings from only one side...you see only the stupid manner of this young peasant from the outside, but you don't see the real beautiful element inside that rough appearance. If you still try to view life from those eyes, the further you go and the more you observe life, the more you will disappoint and bore people.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Mao Tse-Tung. *On Literature and Art*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967 p.2-7.

⁶⁷ Nam Cao. *Đôi Mắt* (A Pair of Eyes). Reprinted in *Toàn Tập Nam Cao* (The Collected Works by Nam Cao). Vol. 3, Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1999. P.467.

Through the words of Đô, the narrator of the story, Nam Cao emphasises the importance of the masses of the peasants in the revolution as follow:

It is so strange. The countryside people are a mystery for us. I have been close to them for a long time. I am almost hopeless because most of them are ignorant, sleazy and cowardly, and they pitifully endure their suffering. When I hear people talking about 'the power of the masses', I am very doubtful. I still think that the majority of our population are the peasants, and even in the next life the peasants would not be able to carry out the revolution. Probably, the period of Lê Lợi and Quang Trung⁶⁸ would not return anymore. But, I was dumbfounded by what I saw in the uprising of the people. In fact, the peasants in our country are still able to carry out a revolution, and to do so in a very energetic way.⁶⁹

Another short story about peasants during the resistance against the French is *Làng* (The Village) [1955] by Kim Lân. This story tells of how the peasants are emotionally related to their villages as well as the nation. The protagonist of the story, Mr. Hai has to leave his village because it is attacked by a foreign army. Described as a typical Vietnamese peasant, Mr. Hai, is attached to the village where he was born. He is, therefore, very upset when there is a rumour that some people in the village collaborated with the enemy. However, he becomes much happier when he finds out that this is untrue. Here, the author tries to point out that the peasants, despite being attached to their home village, take loyalty to the nation as a supreme value, and this is a source of pride and dignity for the Vietnamese peasants, whichever village they come from. This short story, therefore, not only reflected the nationalism of the peasants but also awakened their fighting spirit.

Throughout history, Vietnamese peasants were alienated by the government and state officials. Moreover, Vietnamese villages were semi-autonomous and separated from each other. Surrounded by a bamboo hedge, the village was a small world isolated from the outside world. Traditionally, the village was self-governed and each village had its own customs. It is even believed that, '*phép vua thua lệ làng*' (the law of the

⁶⁸ The historical figures who were the leaders of the peasant struggle against Chinese troops and gained independence for the nation in the 15th and 18th century, respectively.

⁶⁹ Nam Cao. *Đôi Mắt* (A Pair of Eyes). P.468.

king has to yield to the village's custom).⁷⁰ As reflected in Kim Lân's short story, in order to strengthen mass mobilisation, it was necessary for the revolutionaries to penetrate the bamboo hedge, understand the peasant mentality, and make them see the linkage between survival of the village and sovereignty of the nation.

In order to encourage authors to write more about the masses, the Vietnamese Writers' Association granted special literary awards for literature dealing with the topic of workers, farmers and soldiers. *Côn Trâu* (The Buffalo) by Nguyễn Văn Bổng was awarded the top literary prize of the Vietnamese Writers' association in 1953-1954 for literature dealing with the topic of the peasants and the countryside.⁷¹ In this novella, Nguyễn Văn Bổng portrays the patriotism of the peasants fighting against enemies, as they try to protect the buffalo that are very important to their farming.

As is seen in the stories discussed above, these authors tried to create social consciousness among their colleagues and peasants. That is, writers were urged to change their perspectives about peasants and realise the peasants' contribution was vital for the revolution. Writers glorified the patriotism and heroism of the peasants, who were considered national heroes, and their importance in the long history of national resistance was highlighted, as Nam Cao tried to convey in *Đôi Mắt* (A Pair of Eyes). The writers also tried, for example in the short story *Làng* (The Village), to change the attitude of the peasants themselves, to believe that they were no longer confined to small villages, but that they belonged to the bigger national community.

However, the attempt of literature to glorify peasants was interrupted, and the representation of the peasants began to change, when the good relation between peasants and the state was disrupted by the land reform and agricultural collectivisation campaigns.

1.4.2. Peasants and Class Struggle

In the mid-1950s, writers were encouraged to undertake fieldwork in order that they could better understand the peasants and working-class people. The government policies on agriculture had a great influence on writing about the peasants and the

⁷⁰ Jamieson, Neil, 'The Traditional Village in Vietnam' in *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 7, 1986. Pp.89-125.

⁷¹ On the same occasion that *Côn Trâu* was awarded a literary prize, *Xung Kích* (Assault Unit) by Nguyễn Đình Thi was also awarded a prize for literature on the topic of the soldiers, and *Vùng Mỏ* (The Mine) by Võ Huy Tâm was granted a literary award for the topic of the workers.

countryside, especially the land reform programme and the plan to build agricultural co-operatives. The land reform campaign started in 1953, and was then undertaken on a large scale from 1955 to 1956 with the slogan 'land to tillers'. In 1958, it was followed by agricultural collectivisation. During the land reform campaign, the writers were required to participate in the 'ba cùng' or the 'three together' which includes eat together, live together and work together with the peasants, in order to better understand and to educate them about the class struggle as a part of the preparation of the land reform campaign and agricultural collectivisation.⁷² The fieldtrip to the countryside and the experience of living with peasants were regarded as important elements in artistic and literary production. As Phạm Văn Đông emphasises:

I would like to make one small point which I believe is worth stressing: one often says that one must 'go into realities'; that is a common expression, but it is not fully accurate. One should say, 'go into real life', and the verb 'go' is not correct either. You should not 'go' but 'live'. If you want to write about factories, rural areas, co-operatives, about subject outside Hanoi, you should live with them, for months, for years, live the life of ordinary people, the life of peasants or workers. Only in this way can you create. If you want to produce valuable works, you should live there a long time, and reflect over your experience.⁷³

Among the literary works that responded to the government policy of land reform are the collection of short stories *Nông Dân và Địa Chủ* (The Peasants and the Landlords) [1955] by Nguyễn Công Hoan, *Truyện Anh Lục* (The story of Mr. Lục) [1955] by Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, *Ông Chăn Bò Trên Núi Thắm* (A man who Looks after the Buffaloes at the Thắm Mountain) [1955] by Xuân Thu, *Đất Vùng Dậy* (The Awakening Land) by Nguyễn Khắc Thu and *Thôn Quê là Của Chúng Ta* (The Countryside Is Ours) by Trần Thi. The purpose of these stories was to awaken the class-consciousness of the peasants and convince them that the sufferings they had to endure resulted from exploitation by the landlords. Authors concentrated on listing the crimes that the landowner class had committed and how they oppressed and took

⁷² Mã Giang Lân. *Văn Học Việt Nam 1945-1954* (Vietnamese Literature 1945-1954). Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998. P. 74.

⁷³ Phạm Văn Đông, 'Our Homeland, Our People, Our Cause and the Artist' (July 1962) in *Some Cultural Problems* (Speeches). Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1981. P. 84.

advantage of the poor peasants. However, these stories were not successful due to their specific purpose of promoting the land reform campaign. Narration, plot, and characterisation were developed in the same way. Therefore, these works were not highly evaluated for literary value. Moreover, the failure of these stories rested on authors' lack of understanding of the countryside. For example, Nguyễn Công Hoan admitted that his limited knowledge of peasants and the countryside was a an explanation of the unsuccessful result of the collection *Nông Dân và Địa Chủ* (The Peasants and the Landlords).⁷⁴

In theory, land reform was to expropriate the land from rich landlords and distribute it amongst poor peasants, so helping to eliminate the gap between rich and poor in the countryside. According to Trường Chinh's report delivered at the first national conference of the Party in November 1953, it was speculated that the land reform programme would benefit the four areas. Militarily, the land reform would encourage peasants to take part enthusiastically in the resistance. Politically, the role of the National United Front, which constituted more than 90 per cent of rural masses, would be strengthened. Economically, the campaign would liberate peasants from the control and oppression of landlords. They would devote themselves in working in their own land, and this would increase production of national economy as a whole. Culturally, peasants would be able to learn new things and adopt refined customs and habits after they do not have to worry about basic necessities like food and clothes.⁷⁵

However, when the land reform was put into practice, the programme also caused violence, social chaos and antagonism amongst social classes in the village. It ended in failure. Many peasants were killed because they were mistakenly categorised as oppressive landowners. Due to the errors of the land reform, Trường Chinh resigned from his position of Party General Secretary in October in 1956. President Hồ Chí Minh and his government also had to officially apologise for the mistakes of the land reform campaign.⁷⁶ However, it is clearly stated in Vũ Bảo's novel, *Sắp Cưới* (About to Marry) [1957] that although an apology for the mistakes of the land reform is made, it is difficult to amend the feelings and relationships of those who were

⁷⁴ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời Viết Văn của Tôi* (My Literary Life). P. 253.

⁷⁵ Trường Chinh, 'Implementing the Land Reform' in *Selected Writings*. Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 1994. Pp. 526-527.

⁷⁶ Lê Minh Hãn (ed.). *Đại Cương Lịch Sử Việt Nam* (The Outline of Vietnamese History) Vol.3. Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1999. Pp.137-142.

→ no reference to secondary sources

F: Moise, Hg Van Ruy

involved in this programme. In this story, Xuân and Bưởi are about to get married, but the wedding ceremony and their relationship are interrupted when the land reform programme is introduced to their village, and Bưởi's family is categorised as a member of the landowning class. When the mistakes of the land reform are announced, Xuân tries to become reconciled with Bưởi and asks for her forgiveness, but she rejects his request. As is pointed out by the writer, the apologies of the government cannot repair personal relationships broken by the land reform campaign.⁷⁷

The significance of the novel is not only that it reflects the reality of the land reform programme and its impact on village relations, but also that it stresses the role of the writers in defending truth and righteousness. Vietnamese writers have always conformed to the rules and ideology of the state, but it does not mean that they have to praise the wrongdoings of the rulers. The traditional writers, such as the eighteenth-century poetess, Hồ Xuân Hương, condemned without hesitation the corruption of the ruling people, such as mandarins and Buddhist monks. The poet and state official of the nineteenth century, Nguyễn Khuyến, resigned from a high-ranking position to work in the rice fields, and write satirical poems attacking the decadence of the mandarin system. Similarly, Vũ Bảo tried to give a personal viewpoint, which normally was not in accordance with the official one. However, the novel *Sắp Cưới* was banned and heavily criticised as its content went against Communist party direction. It was not until in the late 1980s that the story was allowed to be reprinted. Recently, critics began to review this novel and accept that Vũ Bảo's view is a good judgement of the land reform.⁷⁸

1.4.3. Peasants and Agricultural Collectivisation

Of the many socio-political events that occurred from the late 1950s through to the early 1970s, none is reflected more frequently in novels and short stories than the agricultural collectivisation and its problems. By the late 1960s, more than 80 per cent of peasants participated in co-operatives. For this they were required to give their

⁷⁷ Vũ Bảo. *Sắp Cưới* (About To Marry). Thái Bình: Hội Văn Học Nghệ Thuật Thái Bình (Institute of Literature and Art of Thái Bình), 1988.

⁷⁸ Trần Cương, 'Nhìn Lại Văn Xuôi Viết về Nông Thôn trước Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới (1986)' (Looking back at Prose Writings on the Countryside before the Renovation Period) in *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no. 12, 1995. P. 39.



No! land, buffalo and tools to the co-operatives. This agrarian policy interrupted village life and culture, that is to say, village festivals and celebrations were abolished, historical sites, temples and pagodas were destroyed and used as co-operative offices.⁷⁹ Having joined the collective farms, the peasants ~~were then totally controlled~~ by the policies of central government. Before the co-operative system was adopted, the peasants were required to pay taxes, but they took full charge of farming activities and had freedom in their daily activities, at least in their villages. The agricultural collectivisation changed the status of the peasant from the active role of *người sáng tạo* (creator or maker) to that of passive followers of *người tiêu thụ* (consumer).⁸⁰ In the collective farms, the peasants were strictly required to follow instructions from the local officials who, in turn, were supervised by central authorities.

Writers tried to respond to the government's attempt to establish agricultural co-operatives. Stories written during this period concentrated on depicting the problems of co-operatives and the dilemmas of peasants. That is, peasants were not certain whether or not to join the co-operatives and what they would receive from working for co-operatives. Examples of such stories are: *Tầm Nhìn Xa* (Far Vision) [1963] and *Xung Đột* (Conflict) [1959] by Nguyễn Khải, *Cái Sân Gạch* (The Brick yard) [1959] by Đào Vũ, *Bão Biển* (Storms) [1969] by Chu Văn, *Nơi Xa* (The Far Place) and *Trong Làng* (In the village) [1960] by Nguyễn Kiên, *Chị Cả Phây* (Madame Phây) [1963] by Ngô Ngọc Bội, *Đất Làng* (The Village Earth) [1974] by Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú and *Bông Hoa Súng* (Water Lillies) by Vũ Thị Thường. In short, a main feature of the literature on peasants and the countryside in this period is to criticise peasants for being conservative and reactionary.

The Vietnamese Marxists considered the peasants as only close companions of the workers on the road of the revolution. In theory, they never thought peasants to be as important as the urban workers.⁸¹ The Vietnamese leaders were significantly influenced by Marxist ideology, but they did not share Marx's view on the peasantry. Marx himself did not emphasise the importance of peasants in the revolution. In *The Communist Manifesto*, which was written in the context of Capitalist society, Marx

⁷⁹ Phan Huy Lê (ed.). *The Country Life in the Red River Delta*. Hanoi: NXB Thế Giới, 1997. Pp. 54-55.

⁸⁰ Vũ Tự Lập (ed.). *Văn Hoá và Cư Dân Đồng Bằng Sông Hồng* (Culture and Inhabitants of the Red River Delta). Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1991. Pp.190-192.

⁸¹ For example, Lê Duẩn. *Thanh Niên với Cách Mạng Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa* (Youth and the Socialist Revolution). Hanoi: NXB Thanh Niên, 1968. P. 208.

concentrated on the conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, which he considered the two major classes. Marx does not fail to mention other classes, such as lower middle-class, handicraftsmen and farmers, but he believed that these classes would, *'...sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which modern industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with large capitalists, partly because their special skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production.'*⁸²

In addition, in Chapter 7 of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Marx states that some of the peasants' habits could obstruct the revolution, particularly as they were isolated from each other due to their mode of production. For Marx, the peasants were merely a 'sack of potatoes'. The small-holding peasants could not form any political organisation and constitute a class, and at the same time, they needed to be represented by other classes.⁸³ In short, with their attachment to land and property and their backward habits, the peasants could be an obstacle to the Socialist transformation. In practice, the Vietnamese Communists were, like their Chinese counterparts,⁸⁴ aware that the revolution would not be completed without the support of the peasants. Nevertheless, in theory they still allowed themselves to follow Marx's view of the peasants and the assumption that they would pull back the wheel of the revolution and they would finally merge into the proletariat. This is why, in a number of political writings, Vietnamese Communists regarded the workers as a progressive class. It was the working class, not the peasantry, that was promoted to 'leaders of the revolution'. Marx's comment on the negative qualities of the peasantry is significant to the change of the representation on peasants in Vietnamese literature, notably since the policy of agricultural collectivisation was applied to the development of the countryside in North Vietnam.⁸⁵ In the late 1950s, writers began to replace the celebratory view on peasants with critical assessment.

⁸² Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Simon&Schuster, 1964. P. 71.

⁸³ Marx, Karl, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' in K. Marx and F. Engels. *Selected Works*. New York: International Publishers, 1969. P. 172.

⁸⁴ Mao Tse-Tung once said, *'the force of the peasantry is compatible to that of raging winds or torrential rain. Its violence grows so rapidly, no power would be able to stop it. The peasantry will rip open all the chains that crush it; it will dash down the road to liberation.'* Quoted in FitzGerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake*. London: Macmillan, 1972. P. 171.

⁸⁵ The discussion here is based on literary works by writers of North Vietnam. The Geneva agreement signed in 1954 divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel into two countries: North and South Vietnam.

To exemplify this point, the novel *Cái Sân Gạch* (The Brick Yard) [1959] by Đào Vũ is set during the preparation of the co-operation campaign. The main purpose of the author is to support the co-operation policy and to criticise both the peasants who were suspicious of the benefit they would receive from working in the collective farms, and those who preferred to work on their own private land. At first, Đào Vũ was criticised for choosing a middle-class peasant instead of a poor or landless peasant as main character, but later the story became well-known for its realistic picture and its atmosphere of the early days of establishing a collective farm.⁸⁶

The story tells of an old peasant called Am who resists giving up his land to the collective farm, as he is obsessed with his dream of having a brick yard where his family could dry products cultivated from their farm. He is sceptical about co-operation because it is not clear to him that he would benefit from joining. At the end of the story, Đào Vũ hints that old Am will finally decide to participate in the collective farm after having calculated the benefits. As disclosed by Đào Vũ, the character Am was modelled on a real peasant whom he got to know when he conducted fieldwork in a rural area of the Hải Dương province.⁸⁷

Apart from *Cái Sân Gạch*, the novel *Xung Đột* (The Conflict) by Nguyễn Khải, gained considerable attention from critics as well as readers when it was first published in a newspaper in 1957. This was another story about peasants and the countryside written in response to the foundation of co-operatives. In order to turn a village society into a Socialist commune, cadres had removed village notables and challenged powerful institutions in the countryside, such as the churches. In *Xung Đột* (The Conflict), Nguyễn Khải tried to resolve the conflict between religion and the Communist plan to reform the countryside. The main story line is the village church trying to maintain its autonomy from local administration. People in the village are confused between government policy and the teachings of the Christian priests. Ideological conflicts between religion and politics are discussed and articulated through the story. The main point that the author tries to make is that superstition and irrational belief in religion needed to be overthrown because it impedes Socialist transformation.

⁸⁶ For a review of this novel see Phạm Đình Ân, 'Nhà Văn Đào Vũ và Những Chặng Đường Sáng Tác Văn Học' (The Writer Đào Vũ and the Stages of His Literary Career) in *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no. 8, 1997. Pp.63-67.

⁸⁷ Đào Vũ, 'Lan Man Câu Chuyện Nhân Vật' (Rambling about the Characters) in *Tác Phẩm Mới*, April, 1999. P. 70.

It can be observed that the narrators in the novels by Đào Vũ and Nguyễn Khải detach themselves from the rural masses. The status of the narrators and the peasants whose stories they are telling is not equal. The narrators always know better than their peasant characters, and it is often evident that the narrators try to show their peasant characters what is right and wrong and even make decisions for them. This point of view is different from that of the 1930-1945 works in which narrators speak for the peasants and unveil peasants' frustration. Authorial voices prevail throughout the novels whereas the voices of peasants are marginalized, if not distorted. It is also different from the general view of the 1945-1954 narratives in which narrators try to glorify the significance of peasants for the revolution. The narrators pay respects to their heroic peasant characters, the masters of the revolution, and they employ a humble voice to refer to the peasants. However, in the works written since the introduction of the agricultural collectivisation, such as Đào Vũ and Nguyễn Khải's novels discussed earlier, the narrators even adopt hostile views against peasants, and refer to their peasant characters with an arrogant voice. To be more exact, the narrators keep themselves distant, if not aloof, from the peasants.

However, it would have been hard work for some urban-based writers, such as Nguyễn Khải, to write about peasants and the countryside, as most stories in this period were based on fact and the materials that the writers gathered from their field trips to the countryside. Without doubt, the problems of the countryside portrayed in these works were the real and immediate problems that needed to be solved, and the stories are well researched and realistic. However, the authors tended to give a one-sided picture of the countryside, in that they tried to politicise the peasants, and for almost thirty years of the wartime literature (1945-1975) the peasants were depicted mainly from a political perspective. The authors wrote about the 'peasantry', a social class that played a crucial role in defending the nation and building a socialist country, while the personal affairs and the relationships between people in the countryside were relatively neglected.

There are certain comments that can be made regarding stories of peasants in the period between 1945-1975. First, these stories are always told in the same way. This is because Socialist Realism, and the demand for the utilitarian function of literature

had now created a ready-made formula for literary production. As one critic, Hoàng Trung Thông, uncomfortably remarked:

It is necessary for us to introduce the elements that a [Socialist] man should have, but we need to present these elements through our characters in a lively and life-like way, not in a ready-made formula like a textbook. It is because first of all they are human beings. Human beings cannot be identically modelled.⁸⁸

It is not an exaggeration to conclude that the same story, same stereotyped characters with the same conflicts and in the same situations are continually repeated in literary works produced in this period. Generally speaking, the peasants in the so-called Socialist Realist literature are portrayed as faceless collective masses.

Secondly, notwithstanding the numerous stories about peasants and the countryside, it is difficult to find an outstanding peasant character that would impress the reading public and could remain in the memory of the readers, as did the characters of Chí Dâu, Anh Pha and Chí Phèo in the works produced during the period 1930-1945. The peasant characters in the literature composed in the 1945-1975 period are overshadowed by the political ideology that the authors tried to convey. War and the Socialist transformation, mainly conducted in the countryside, was the urgent task with which the public, including writers, were concerned. That is why the downtrodden rural masses were turned into an object of mass mobilisation, and the centres of ideological debates between Capitalism and Socialism, individualism and collectivism, and Ta (We/Vietnamese) and Địch (Enemies).

Thirdly, the writers of the stories about peasants tried to reflect what was said in the theory. In other words, they tried to illustrate theory and party policies rather than make an effort to understand the peasants and the countryside problem. These stories, were, therefore, not always a true reflection of peasants and the countryside. Whether or not writers were aware of this problem, they chose to follow Party lines and respond to government policies. The importance of the peasants is intentionally undermined by the overstatement of the role of the working class. The long struggle

⁸⁸ Hoàng Trung Thông, 'Vấn Đề Thể Hiện Cuộc Sống Mới và Con Người Mới trong Tác Phẩm Văn Học' (The Problem of Reflecting New Life and New Man in Literary Works). in *Văn Nghệ Vũ Khí Sắc Bền* (Art: A Sharp Weapon). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1962. P. 174.

for the national independence of Vietnam owes its success to the contribution of the peasantry. History has proved that Vietnamese peasants are worth more than 'a sack of potatoes', as Christine White states, ' [t]he Vietnamese revolution is commonly conceived as a nationalist peasant revolution'.⁸⁹ The prominent literary scholar and critic Vũ Ngọc Phan once expressed his recognition of the significant contribution of the peasants as follow:

The history (of Vietnam) is full of the uprisings of the peasants. Even now (1955), in front of our eyes, the peasants are the main force of the revolution. If there had not been peasants, the revolution (the August Revolution of 1945) would not have been successful.⁹⁰

Among the three characters required for wartime literature, namely the peasant, the worker and the soldier, stories about the worker are not as successful as the stories about the peasant or soldier. The Capitalist economic form introduced by foreign traders under the French administration in the early twentieth century was interrupted by the war and political conflicts. Therefore, the number of urban working class people was limited. As for the soldiers, they often originated from a peasant background, as they are generally called 'nông dân mặc áo lính' (the peasant in soldier's uniform).

Fourthly, the wartime context and limit of Socialist Realism prevent writers revealing the other side of the reality in the countryside. Socialist Realist theory requires writers to portray truth but it needs to be a positive one. As Trường Chinh warns writers and artists:

It should be borne in mind that there are truths worth mentioning, but there are also truths which are better left unmentioned, at least temporarily, and if mentioned at all, the question is where and how they should be revealed.⁹¹

⁸⁹ White, Christine Katherin. *Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution: 1920-1957*. Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University, 1981. P. 447.

⁹⁰ Vũ Ngọc Phan, 'Người Nông Dân Việt Nam trong Truyện Cổ Tích' (Vietnamese Peasants in Folk Tales) in *Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Văn Sử Địa*, no. 4, 1955. P. 30.

⁹¹ Trường Chinh, 'Marxism and Vietnamese Culture' in *Selected Writing*. P. 270.

This is an explanation to why the errors of the government policy of rural development and the negative reality of the countryside, such as corruption and village bullies, seem to have been forgotten in the 1945-1975 literature. A remarkable example of this aspect is the disappointing results of the land reform programme. It is not until the late 1980s that these unfavourable facts can be mentioned and discussed in literary texts again, as will be examined in the remaining parts of this thesis.

**** * * * *

The representation of peasants and the countryside in the literary works from the traditional period to the end of the war in 1975 was continually based on the wartime relationship of the state, the writers and the peasants. Apart from the popular literature, the stories about peasants and the countryside were used as tools of national defence and construction, and were aimed at mobilising the peasant force and propagating government policies. Having borne in mind that the revolution was village-based, the writers made an effort to strengthen the importance of both peasants and the countryside. However, literary texts show that the writers were moderators between the state and the peasants. The ideological articulation, debates and criticism are represented in order to respond to state policies rather than to show the concerns of the peasants written about in literary texts. The relationship between the state, writer, and peasants in wartime Vietnam, when the Confucian concept of social responsibility was highlighted and everybody was asked to selflessly sacrifice for the existence of the nation, accounted for the continuity of the representation of peasants and the countryside in Vietnamese literature prior to 1975. However, this long tradition of writing about peasants and the countryside was interrupted once the war was finished and the nation was unified in the spring of 1975, and the Renovation policy declared in 1986 advocated some changes in the literary perception of peasants and the countryside. This is the topic to be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Peasants and the Countryside in Post-1975 Literature

This chapter has two main purposes. First, it outlines the development of Vietnamese literature in the post-1975 period and explains socio-political changes that help create a new literary page in Vietnamese literary history. Secondly, the chapter will look at the representation of peasants and the countryside in post-1975 literature, and compare this with the images of peasants and the countryside in literary texts of previous periods.

2.1. An Overview of the Development of Post-1975 Literature

The development of post-1975 literature can be chronologically divided into two stages: 1975-1986, and 1986 onwards. First, it will give an overview of the literary development and socio-political changes in Vietnamese society since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 until the announcement of the Renovation policy (Đổi Mới) in 1986. Secondly, the study will concentrate on the influence of the Renovation policy which enabled the transformation in Vietnamese literature.

2.1.1. The Period between 1975-1986

1975 is a significant year in Vietnamese history. The victory of North Vietnam over American troops and the Southern government ended the long traumatic period of war, and reunified the two parts of the country. It is probably the first time in the long history of national struggle that Vietnamese people enjoyed peace and independence.¹ Peace allowed Vietnam to develop economically and socially. At the 4th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist party, held in December 1976, it was declared that the Socialist model would be applied to the whole country. The agricultural collectivisation, which had been implemented in the North since the 1950s, was brought into the southern part of the country.²

*to how?
→ in 1978*

¹ Phan Cu Đê, a literary critic, once said, 'Vietnam is a country where was much more common than peace; history is written in the nation's blood and tears.' In Phan Cu Đê, 'Religion, Philosophy and Literature in Vietnam' in *Texts and contexts: Interactions between Literature and Culture in Southeast Asia*. Quezon City: University of Philippines, 1999. P. 109.

² For more detail on the government attempt to collectivise agricultural farms in the South and its failure, see more in Raymond, Chad, 'The Insoluble Internal Conflicts of Agricultural Collectivisation in Vietnam' in *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. Vol. 5, no. 2, 2001. Pp. 41-70.

Though the war ended with their victory, Vietnamese people could not, however, enjoy pride and happiness for long due to the realisation of post-war reality, especially economic deterioration. The post-war economic situation in Vietnam became more difficult when the USSR and China reduced financial aid, and the United States did not grant the three billion dollars of reconstruction assistance agreed by President Nixon in 1973.³ To make matters worse, over 3 billion tonnes of crops were lost because of typhoons in 1978. The war between Vietnam and Cambodia took place in December of the same year, and the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict in 1979 brought Vietnam to food shortage and an economic crisis. These economic and political situations left people with a sense of hopelessness.

X In the late 1970s and early 1980s, workers began to desert their jobs at factories. Peasants were reluctant to take part in agricultural collective farms. Intellectuals also lost interest in carrying on their activities.⁴ The Communist party was blamed for its bureaucracy, corruption and excessive centralisation. It is stated in a study of agricultural development that some high-ranking officials in Vietnam recognised that since the late 1960s, the collective system had not been effective. In Vĩnh Phú province, land was secretly distributed to the peasants and family-based production was allowed, but this was then heavily criticised by the government as being against the government policy of collectivisation. The decrease in food production seen in the late 1970s was partly due to the peasants losing their enthusiasm for working in co-operative farms. The situation in the countryside became worse when the number of conflicts between the peasants and local cadres, who behaved like 'cường hào' (tyrants, usually refers to village bullies), increased.⁵

Also, in the late 1970s, the activities and problems of the collective farms continued to be a main theme explored by novelists and short story writers, for example in *Ao Làng* (The Village Pond) [1975] by Ngô Ngọc Bội, and *Buổi Sáng* (In the Morning) [1977] by Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú. It is evident that the co-operative system failed to

³ Marr, David G. and Christine P. White (eds.). *Post-war Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development*. New York: Southeast Asia Program, 1988. P. 3.

⁴ Nguyễn Khắc Viện. *Vietnam: A Long History*. Revised edition. Hanoi: NXB Thế Giới, 1999. Pp. 390-396.

⁵ Kerkvliet, Benedict R. Tria. *State-Village Relations in Vietnam: Contested Cooperatives and Collectivisation*. Working Paper 85. Australia: The Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1993.

respond to the basic needs of the peasants. The farmers reluctantly worked in the collective farms. Given the opportunity, they would earn more money by being small traders, simply because they did not have enough food from working for the co-operative.

A striking change in what was written about peasants and the countryside in the late 1970s is that writers tried to explain the reasons why the peasants had to rely on second jobs, rather than criticising them for not having enthusiasm for the co-operatives, as happened in pre-1975 literature. During wartime, writers were not encouraged to depict reality, as it was assumed that depicting negative aspects of society might discourage people from fighting foreign enemies or producing food for the army. In the post-war period, writers could, however, no longer overlook these negative facts and they became more realistic about the socio-political situations.

The subject of how reality should be reflected in literature was widely discussed among Vietnamese writers and critics, notably in the article *Viết Về Chiến Tranh* (Writing about War) [1978] by Nguyễn Minh Châu. This influential article calls for an awareness of the role of literature and raises the issue of how writers should respond to the post-war socio-political reality. In his article, Nguyễn Minh Châu remarks that writing about war failed to impress the readers of a new period because the writers paid more attention to historical events than to the psychological state of the people who had to undergo the wars. Moreover, portrayal of the war was often not realistic. The Vietnamese soldiers tended to be characterised as extremely good and heroic, whereas the enemies were evil and weak. Nguyễn Minh Châu asserts that the reality presented in the war literature was '*cái hiện thực ước mơ*' (wishful reality) rather than '*cái hiện thực đang tồn tại*' (actual reality).⁶ Controlled by the party's strict rule on literature, Vietnamese writers were, through the long period of war, obliged to reveal only the 'reality' that was accepted by the party. Therefore, though it is concerned exclusively with war stories, Nguyễn Minh Châu's article discusses an enduring topic of how reality should be reflected in literature.

The role of literature and its relation to politics was questioned again in a more controversial essay, *Về Một Đặc Điểm của Văn Học và Nghệ Thuật ở Ta trong Giai*

⁶ Nguyễn Minh Châu, 'Viết Về Chiến Tranh' (Writing about War) in *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội*, no. 11, 1978. Pp. 110-115.

Đoạn vừa Qua (On a Main Characteristic of Our Literature and Art in the Period Just Passed). In this essay, the famous scholar and literary critic, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, comments that there is an ambiguity between what must exist and what really exists. It seems that writers tended to describe what must exist and forgot to write honestly about what actually exists. This is because they were familiar with the style of writing of the '*chủ nghĩa hiện thực phải đạo*' (Doctrine-ism), and always attempted to ensure that the themes and characterisation were made to meet political requirements and to illustrate government policy.⁷

→ *hy*
 Unfortunately, the two articles by Nguyễn Minh Châu and Hoàng Ngọc Hiến were written in the late 1970s, when Vietnam had to endure the war with Cambodia and had a frontier conflict with China. Therefore, it might not have been the right time for literature to make a move and free itself from political commitment. Even though both articles were well received and widely discussed by literary scholars, critics and the reading public, they were not approved by the party hardliners, and both authors were severely criticised.

However, despite the harsh criticism of these two articles, writers began to represent a more realistic picture of post-war society. Good examples are famous novels by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn: *Đứng Trước Biển* (Standing before the Sea) [1982] and *Cù Lao Tràm* (The Tràm Island) [1985]. In these two novels, the author attempts to speak out against the unpleasant reality that people at the time either dared not mention, or pretended not to be aware of. Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn states that bureaucracy, corruption and materialism are problems that existed not only in Capitalist societies but also in this socialist country.

In *Đứng Trước Biển* (Standing before the Sea), Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn shows that life in post-war society was complicated, and it could be even more complicated than it had been during the war period. The economic revitalisation and building of a Socialist society were difficult tasks. Consequently, those who took charge of building a better society needed, as Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn implies, to stand their ground firmly to avoid being tempted by personal benefit or materialistic values. The economic crisis and the hardship in the countryside were disclosed in the widely discussed novel *Cù Lao*

⁷ Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, 'Điểm của Văn Học và Nghệ Thuật ở Ta trong Giai Đoạn vừa qua' (On a Main Characteristic of Our Literature and Art in the Period just Passed) in *Văn Nghệ*, no. 23, 1979. Pp. 2-3.

Tràm (The Tràm Island). Despite showing his faith in Socialism, the author writes about the problems of the peasants in the Southern region. It is pointed out in this novel that Vietnamese peasants are still loyal to the party, but, nevertheless, they begin to rebel against local officials who are exploiting villagers for personal advantages. A great contribution of this novel is its depiction of the alarming economic hardship caused by official mismanagement and corruption.

Although the two famous novels by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn reflect the worries about the decline of Socialism and conflicts in the countryside in post-war society, they are still constructed in the same formula of Socialist Realism. Both novels were well-received by the reading public for their social contents, but not much praised for their literary merit.⁸ Moreover, in spite of the fact that Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn reveals the reality of the countryside and the peasants' frustration against social injustice, his representation of peasants still follows the stereotypes. That is they are generally moralistic, industrious and socially concerned, as was portrayed in the wartime literature.

It is remarkable that a new representation of peasants and the countryside first began to appear in *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest Who Lives Far Away) [1984] by Nguyễn Minh Châu and Lê Lưu's novel, *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) [1986]. The former, the first time, represents peasants in a more complex and realistic way. It also reveals complex relationships between the peasants, other social classes and their socio-political environments. In both stories, the authors tell of what the individual peasant has to go through in the long struggle and how his life is affected by historical vicissitudes and ideological conflicts. These two literary works will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Let us now turn to the development of *văn học đổi mới* (Renovation Literature).

2.1.2. The Renovation Period

⁸ For example, Nguyễn Thị Huệ, a female critic, remarks that, 'For a literary concern, it seems that Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's works are 'sự hy sinh nghệ thuật' (the sacrifice of literary value).' See more in Nguyễn Thị Huệ, 'Tiểu thuyết của Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn trong Bước Chuyển của Văn Học đầu Những Năm 80' (Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's Novels during the Transitional Period of Literature in early 1980s) in *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no. 11, 1997. P. 75.

The economic crisis directed the party leaders to the decentralising policy known as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation), which was significantly influenced by the reform in economic planning of the Communist countries in Eastern Europe, particularly the policy of Perestroika and Glasnost in the Soviet Union. The Renovation policy was announced at the Sixth Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party in 1986. The Renovation was greatly supported by Nguyễn Văn Linh, a more liberal-minded General Secretary of the Communist Party in the mid-1980s, who tried to move away from centralised control towards a market economy in order to rescue the country from its economic malaise. The Renovation policy allowed individuals and private enterprises to take part in economic sectors, and loosened the political and ideological control. In 1989, *no!* the United States abolished its economic boycott against Vietnam after the Vietnamese government agreed to withdraw troops from Cambodia. Also, countries in Europe and South East Asia began to normalise their international relations with Vietnam, indicating that Vietnam was no longer isolated from the world community.

Agricultural policy was also reviewed after the Renovation was implemented. The resolution of *khoán 10* (product-based contract no. 10) introduced in 1988, followed by the Land Law issued in 1993, allowed the peasants to have full rights in long-term use of land on a contractual basis. According to the 1993 land law, the persons entrusted with the use of land have five rights: to transfer land as inheritance to their descendants; to transfer land to other persons if they so wish; to change the purpose of use of the land; to use land as security for a mortgage; and to rent land.⁹ As a result of this reform, agriculture began to recover and farm production increased.¹⁰ Moreover, the product-based contract no.10 initiated changes in relations between peasants, co-operatives and the state. Peasant families were now allowed to take full control of their businesses, and expected to pay taxes to the state, but they could now sell rice at market price. The government policy of '*decentralising and liberalising of the peasants' economic activities*'¹¹, and the introduction of the product-based contract no.10 can be seen as the end of the agricultural collectivisation in Vietnam. ✓

⁹ Liljestrom, Rita et al. *Profit and Poverty in Rural Vietnam: Winners and Losers of a Dismantled Revolution*. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998. Pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Phan Huy Lê, and al. *The Country Life in the Red River Delta*. Hanoi: NXB Thế Giới, 1997. P. 56.

¹¹ Le Cao Doan, 'Agricultural Reforms in Vietnam in the 1980s' in Norlund, Carolyn L. Gates and Vu Cao Dam (eds.). *Vietnam in a Changing World*. Irene Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995. Pp.109-124.

The influence of the Renovation policy expanded into the literary field. At a meeting of writers and artists on 6-7 October 1987, Nguyễn Văn Linh guaranteed that freedom of expression would be given to writers and artists. He also confirmed that art and literature would be 'unchained' from the party.¹² This atmosphere of openness allowed writers to rethink the role of art and literature in a new socio-political context. For instance, Nguyễn Ngọc, a well-known soldier-writer, pointed out that literature needed to adapt itself to peace. He remarked that it was understandable that wartime literature had to sacrifice its aesthetic value to the cause of the nation, and writers had to concentrate on collectivism before individualism. At a meeting with the party leaders, Nguyễn Ngọc declared that literature should be untied from that political commitment because its mission as a political weapon ended when the war was over. He said: *'I think that literature perfectly completed its responsibility in the two wars of resistance. Together with other fields, literature contributed worthily, creating and uniting the strength of people and the party in order to defeat enemies.'*¹³

— but all after 1987!

Nguyễn Ngọc's view on the change of the role of literature and art in the post-war period was supported by many writers and critics. For example, the critic and poet Trần Mạnh Hảo makes the interesting comment that, *'War is the most irregular phenomenon of humanity.'* This irregularity had an impact on all social activities, and literary production was no exception. However, the post-war literature, as Trần Mạnh Hảo emphasises, should be different from wartime literature and adapt itself to peace.¹⁴

Owing to the atmosphere of liberalisation, the tension of the relationship between literature and politics was widely discussed again among Vietnamese literati after having been silenced for almost forty years under the strict literary guidance and cultural policies of the Communist party. The anxiety between the yearning for freedom of expression and political control is clearly expressed in probably the most daring and controversial article of the late 1980s, *Hãy Đọc Lời Ai Điều cho Một Đoạn*

¹² 'Đồng Chí Tổng Bí Thư Nguyễn Văn Linh Nói Chuyện với Văn Nghệ Sĩ' (General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh Talking with Artists and Writers) in *Văn Nghệ* (17-10-1987). P. 3.

¹³ Nguyễn Ngọc, the speech is published under the title 'Cần Phát Huy Đầy Đủ Chức Năng Xã Hội của Văn Học Nghệ Thuật' (It is Necessary to Fully Develop the Social Function of Literature) in *Văn Nghệ*, no.44 (31-10-1987) P. 2.

¹⁴ Trần Mạnh Hảo, 'Năm Mươi Năm Văn Học dưới Cái Nhìn Đổi Mới' (Fifty Years of Literature from the Renovation Perspective) in *Việt Nam Nửa Thế Kỳ Văn Học (1945-1995) (Half Century of Vietnamese Literature)*. Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1997. Pp. 279-290.

2-hy? *Văn Nghệ Minh Họa* (Let Us Say Farewell to a Period of Illustrative Literature) by Nguyễn Minh Châu. There was a rumour that Nguyễn Minh Châu intended to present this article, before the article was published in *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and the Art newspaper), at a meeting with General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh. Unfortunately, he failed to do so due to illness. In the article, Nguyễn Minh Châu asserts that the literature in the past years only illustrated political doctrines, as writers had lived in fear and dared not speak the truth. Nguyễn Minh Châu comments that because writers had merely tried to write only what would please the authorities, literature had become weak and poor, and writers had invariably felt guilty for the rest of their literary careers.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the atmosphere of freedom and openness did not last long. Tension between political leaders and writers grew once more with the dismissal, in December 1988, of Nguyễn Ngọc, an important advocate of the Renovation in Literature. Nguyễn Ngọc was removed from his position as editor of *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and the Art newspaper). There was no clear reason for the sacking, but it was generally assumed that Nguyễn Ngọc was dismissed because he published the trio of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's historical stories; *Kiểm Sắc* (Sharp Sword), *Vàng Lửa* (Fired Gold), and *Phẩm Tiết* (Chastity) that challenged the way the party viewed history and evaluated historical figures.¹⁶ In early 1989, Nguyễn Văn Linh reminded the press of the limited extent to which the liberalisation of the media would be allowed. As he says, '*The press must reflect the people's voice, but it is also a tool of the party. As such, it must speak for the party in leading the people and must introduce the reasoning of the party and the state to the people.*'¹⁷

In July of the same year, Dương Thu Hương was expelled from the party for being outspoken about the issues of democracy. In April 1990, she was arrested for trying to send the manuscript of her novel *Tiểu Thuyết Vô Đề* (Novel without a Name) to a publisher abroad. In November of the same year she was released, but there is no doubt that the government still kept a close eye on her. Also, Ngô Ngọc Bội's novel *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare), which reminisced about the days of the land reform campaign,

¹⁵ Nguyễn Minh Châu, 'Hãy Đọc Ai Điều cho Một Giai Đoạn Văn Nghệ Minh Họa' (Let Us Say Farewell to a Period of Illustrative Literature) in *Văn Nghệ*, no. 49-50 (5-12-1987). P. 2.

¹⁶ Hiebert, Murray, 'One Step Backward' in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 May 1989. P. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Also in Warner, F. W., 'Writers' Woes' in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 May 1992. P. 38.

was confiscated for five months before it was allowed to be circulated.¹⁸ These events suggest that the Vietnamese government became more aware of the impact of literature and consequently did not allow literary activities complete freedom from the party line.

2.2. Towards a New Representation of Peasants and the Countryside

The representation of peasants has changed dramatically in post-1975 literature compared to the way they were portrayed between 1945 and 1975. Four possible explanations can be given for this change: the decline of Socialist Realism, the rethinking of collectivism and individualism, the transformation of literary generation from urban-based/middle-class writers to peasant-origin writers, and the socio-political disillusionment shared by Vietnamese from all classes, writers and peasants alike.

2.2.1. The Decline of Socialist Realism

The decline of the Socialist Realist style of writing in post-war literature allowed writers to represent peasants by means of a different style of writing. Notably, writers began to reveal a negative side of society rather than focus only on positive truth. It is clear that Socialist Realism had lost its popularity since the early 1970s. It is first seen in the poems of young soldier-poets, such as Thanh Thảo, Nguyễn Duy, and Xuân Quỳnh, which contain anti-hero elements. In the late 1970s, stories about war also began to be presented in a new style of writing by soldier writers, notably Thái Bá Lợi with his novel called *Họ Cùng Thời với Những Ai* (They Live in the Same Time With Many People), Nguyễn Trí Huân with his work, *Năm 75 Họ đã Sống như thế* (The Year 1975 They Lived like That), and Nguyễn Trọng Oánh with his novel, *Đất Trắng* (The White Earth) [1979]. These authors began to reveal another side of the war, such as failure, fear and death. In *Đất Trắng* (The White Earth), Nguyễn Trọng Oánh reveals the failure of the Vietnamese troops in 1968, when a large mobilisation of the masses took place as well as recruitment of soldiers, in order to liberate the South. The result was many civilian and military deaths: a fact that became distorted by certain writers. Some writers even referred to this abortive attack as a victory because

Tết
offensive

¹⁸ Quoted in *Nhà Văn Việt Nam Hiện Đại* (Contemporary Vietnamese Writers). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1997. P.78.

a typical Socialist Realist work should not contain such negativity. Although *Đất Trắng* was not as successful as stories about war written in the later period, such as *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh* (The Sorrow of War) by Bảo Ninh, it was an early attempt to unfold the true facets of the war.

In the early 1980s, Socialist Realist works were rarely found in the book market. Most successful works in this period contain elements not acceptable to the standard of Socialist Realism, such as individualism, anti-heroism and pessimism. The examples are Nguyễn Khải's novels such as *Cha và Con và...* (Father and Child and...) [1979], and *Gặp Gỡ Cuối Năm* (Meeting at the end of the Year) [1982], Nguyễn Minh Châu's short stories, such as *Người Đàn Bà Trên Chuyến Tàu Tốc Hành* (A Woman on an Express Train) [1982], Ma Văn Kháng's successful works like *Mùa Mùa Hạ* (Summer Rain) [1982] and *Mùa Lá Rụng Trong Vườn* (The Season of Leaves Falling in the Garden) [1985], and Vũ Tú Nam's short story titled *Sống Với Thời Gian Hai Chiều* (Living in Two Sides of Time) [1983]. Therefore, by the late 1980s, the majority of writers could no longer call themselves Socialist Realist writers.

On 25 August 1989, a discussion about the direction and future of Socialist Realism was officially held at the Institute of Literature in Hanoi. The talk was mainly about whether or not Socialist Realism should be considered as the official style of writing. However, the majority of writers, literary critics and scholars who attended the meeting hesitated in making a final decision. Although a few conservative scholars suggested that writers should continue writing in the Socialist Realist form, this literary style of writing was less supported among the meeting of scholars and critics.¹⁹ The prominent scholar Hoàng Ngọc Hiến even wanted it to be abolished, as he asserted:

Socialist Realism is a fake concept that has caused troubles for writers and artists, including scholars and authorities in the literary field, for a long time. At the beginning, it was just a banner, but then people turned it into a subject of study, elaborated it, ascribed to it a style of writing, and made it so powerful. The argument (on Socialist Realism) is useless.²⁰

¹⁹ The report of the conference was published in *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no.5, 1989. Pp. 8-27.

²⁰ Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, quoted from *Văn Nghệ*, 5-3-1988.

Needless to say, this literary style of writing is no longer followed in practice, though it is strongly defended in theory. Stories about peasants and the countryside are also influenced by the decline of this style of writing. Writers have begun to portray peasants and the countryside in a more realistic way. Peasants are no longer perceived as superheroes. They are now depicted as real human beings who can commit wrongdoings and experience failure, just like everybody else. The instances of this change will be illustrated through the discussion of literary works in the following sections.

2.2.2. *Collectivism and Individualism*

Through the long history of war and foreign invasion, the criterion used for the evaluation and judgement of people and literary production was 'collective responsibility'. In wartime, a person could be regarded as good and respectable only when devoting himself or herself altruistically to the nation. In literary works, the characters are represented as a part of the group. Individuals are allowed to appear in literary works only when they represent an ideal member of the group. It was also generally believed that any good literary work must underline collectivism and include social and political consciousness. However, the concept of collective and socio-political commitment in literature became less important in the post-war period when writers began to pay more attention to the inner dilemmas of individuals, their daily problems and their relationships with others in society.

The changes in socio-political context since the late 1980s allowed Vietnamese scholars, writers and critics to rethink the issue of collectivism and individualism. For instance, the famous writer Nguyễn Huy Thiệp expresses his view on this subject as follows: '*Human beings have to think about many things, not only political affairs. Literature must pay attention to human life and reflect the complexity of life.*'²¹ Likewise, in the controversial article entitled *Văn Nghệ và Chính Trị* (Literature and Politics), Lê Ngọc Trà proposes that literature's function is to explore and depict human life, and reflect the destiny of each individual. Compared to political ideology, stories about everyday life, such as love stories, might be considered '*nonsensical, weak or romantic*'. Lê Ngọc Trà agrees that '*Politics is something very important in*

²¹ Quoted from the report no.16 in Academic report of the Conference 'Những Vấn Đề Thời Sự Văn Học' (Many Current Problems of Literature) Teacher Training College, Hanoi, published in April 1989.

society', but strongly argues that '*life is still more important than politics*'.²² This issue is also discussed in Hoàng Ngọc Hiến's essay '*Chủ Nghĩa Hiện Thực và Chủ Nghĩa Nhân Đạo*' (Realism and Humanism). In it, he suggests that individualism should be better emphasised. As he argues:

National liberation is a sprout of the liberation of mankind. Our nation is already liberated, but individuals are still tied by visible and invisible threads. Socialist humanism respects the liberation of each individual as well as of mankind.²³

This emphasis on individualism and humanistic views in literature had a significant influence on the representation of peasants in the post-war literature. In wartime literature (1945-1975), peasants were either glorified as 'the people' or criticised as 'the small-holding peasants'. They were never depicted as individuals unless it is to strengthen the concept of the collective community. With a new perspective to assess literary value and judge human beings, the representation of peasants began to change, in that they are now recognised as individual human beings, with good and bad qualities. The number of literary works on peasants and the countryside in the post-1975 period is not as numerous as it was the 1945-1975 literature, but peasants are treated as individuals and their dreams and personal happiness are more highlighted.

In wartime, it was unthinkable for Vietnamese writers to concentrate on individual pursuits, and they would probably have been accused of being 'decadent bourgeoisie'. Also, it was generally assumed that only middle-class characters had a sense of alienation from society. As for a peasant, he would be happy to be a part of village he or she belongs to. Fitzgerald explains the relationship between individual and community in traditional Vietnam, as follows:

Within his society the individual had no separate existence. His sense of personal identity came from his sense of participation in the society and in the

²² Lê Ngọc Trà, 'Văn Nghệ và Chính Trị' (Literature and Politics) in *Văn Nghệ*, no. 51-52 (19-12-1987). P. 10.

²³ Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, '*Chủ Nghĩa Hiện Thực và chủ Nghĩa Nhân Đạo*' (Realism and Humanism) in *Văn Học và Học Văn* (Literature and Literary Studies). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1997. P. 20.

universe. The moral problem for the individual was to discover not what he himself thought or wanted, but what the society required of him.²⁴

Thus, it indicated a change in the perception of the peasants when writers relate the issue of individual happiness to the depiction of peasants. This is to say that peasants are no longer faceless masses in the literary pages. It is also remarkable that writers begin to use the form of tragedy, instead of epic, to represent peasants. In Socialist Realist literature, peasants are characterised as optimistic and enthusiastic about the future of the regime. Peasants can be depicted as individuals, but these individual peasants represent the good qualities of the peasants that the Socialist state requires or would like to see. Therefore, selflessness, industriousness and heroism are usually glorified, whereas weakness, loss and weariness are not allowed to be portrayed in literary works. In addition, the peasants in the Socialist Realist literature are never alienated from society. In contrast, the post-war literature reveals how the peasants are anxious about the tension between individual desires and aspirations and collective duties. While trying to complete their tasks and responsibilities to the nation, the peasants felt, at the same time, estranged and exhausted.

This shift in the form of epic to tragedy is closely related to the changing value of the post-war society from collectivism to individualism. As Tillyard explains the nature of epic form as follow:

What most makes the epic kind is a communal or choric quality. The epic writer must express the feelings of a large group of people living in his own time. True, all personal feelings take on some from the general temper of an age. But, granted that, there are feelings that appear to be the unique concern of the individual and feelings which he knows, consciously or not, are shared by a great body of his fellows. That sharing gives those feelings a peculiar force and favour, and it forms the psychological ground and the justification of the epic kind.²⁵

In contrast with the epic form that underlines collective values and feelings, tragedy has a special character to highlight individual desires. As Tillyard puts it:

²⁴ FitzGerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake*. London: Macmillan, 1972. P. 209.

²⁵ Tillyard, E.M. W. *The Epic Strain in the English Novel*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1958. P. 15.

Tragedy cannot take some imprint of its age, but its nature is to be timeless. It deals with the recurrent human passions and, aiming at great simplicity, presents their bare elements, with not too much local circumstantiation. It teaches not what it is like to be alive at a certain time but it is like to be a human being.²⁶

Moreover, the change in the use of literary form to represent peasants' life shows the decline of Socialist Realism, as mentioned in the preceding section, which usually focuses on reflecting the positive side of society and success more than exposing negative things or discussing failure. In contrast, tragedy is a literary form that underlines the flaws of main characters. To illustrate the shift from epic to tragedy and the transfer of emphasis from collectivism to individualism in the representation of peasants, let us take a look at two acclaimed novels: *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) [1986] by Lê Lưu and *Bến Không Chồng* (A Watering Place for Women with No Husband) [1990] by Dương Hương.

The history of a Vietnamese peasant is thoroughly narrated through the life of Giang Minh Sài, the protagonist in Lê Lưu's *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past). In this novel, the author portrays what a Vietnamese peasant has had to go through, from the feudal period, through to socialist transformation and the post-war era. The story starts in 1954 when the French are defeated and ends in 1984, two years before the Renovation policy is announced. At the age of ten, Sài was already married. The marriage was arranged by his parents, which was quite common for traditional families in Vietnam. Sài does not love his wife, Tuyết, but he cannot leave her because it would have an effect on the reputation of his family, particularly as his father is a Confucian scholar, and his uncle and brother are Communist cadres. He is even more irritated by his wife when he falls in love with Hương, his classmate. Disappointed that his family will not allow him to divorce his wife and be with the woman he loves, Sài decides to escape from frustration by joining the army:

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

He left as if sneaking away, as if fleeing from yesterday, today and tomorrow, as if he were smugly satisfied with his “courageous” decision to endure in silence.²⁷

When his superiors find out that Sài does not love his wife and is obsessed with another woman, they are unhappy. They use the concept of class to analyse his relationship with his wife, and conclude that Sài shows indifference towards his wife because he is influenced by ‘bourgeois thinking’. They assume that he looks down on his wife because she is an ordinary peasant, and that he longs for Hương because she is more refined and educated. His superiors set the condition that he will be allowed to join the Party only when he loves his wife. Finally, Sài obediently agrees to love his wife. However, he is not allowed to become a party member because his wife’s father has associated with the French. Furthermore, Hương decides to marry someone else after she hears that his wife is pregnant. Finally, his family and superiors allow him to divorce. He once complains to Đỗ Mạnh, described in the novel as a liberal-minded political officer, that his personal life might not have been so full of suffering if his family and superiors had not intervened. But his former commander argues that Sài cannot blame anybody but himself for his unhappiness. As Đỗ Mạnh explains to Sài:

Your own life is nothing but the well-worn life of a hired hand. Eat whatever food is given, do whatever job is assigned, always anxiously waiting for the boss’s orders, never having the nerve to decide anything on your own. That’s okay for a little child. But after your graduation, you became a citizen, a combatant, why wouldn’t you take responsibility for your own life? Why couldn’t you openly say, ‘This is a coercive situation. My feelings will not allow me to live with that woman. If you insist on browbeating me into it, I stand ready to give up everything I have. Even if I have to return home as a (plough)man, I will do it to be able to live the kind of life I want.’ But, you didn’t say this. Instead, like a man tied with ropes, you dared not move, you only waited anxiously, hoping against hope.²⁸

When the war is over, Sài works in Hanoi. Free from familial and political ties, he expects to pursue a happy life and decide things for himself. He gets married for a

²⁷ Lê Lưu. *A Time far Past*. Translated by Ngo Vinh Hai, Nguyen Ba Chung, Kevin Bowen and David Hunt. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press Amherst, 1997. P. 50.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

second time to Châu, a city girl. This marriage is also unsuccessful and ends with divorce due to the differences between the two of them. Moreover, Châu hurriedly married Sài, not because she was in love with him, but because she was secretly pregnant by a married man. After his marriage fails, Sài returns to his home village and becomes the chairman of a collective farm.

Based on Lê Lưu's article, '*Tâm Huyết và Mong Ước của Một Đời Văn*' (Confidence and Expectation of a Literary Life), the character Sài shares some aspects with Lê Lưu's personal life. Like Sài, Lê Lưu was arranged to marry at the age of ten. He also reveals that a reason he decided to join the army is to get away from his wife. It is also unveiled that the character Hương is modelled on a Polytechnic school student that he had encountered when he attended a writing course. In the same article, Lê Lưu clearly explains the reason he chose to write about peasants through an individual experience. As he says:

For the long period of time, since the beginning of the wartime until early 1980s, we did not talk about the tragedy of individuals. I would like to write about an individual, a concrete life with happiness and suffering, gain and loss.²⁹

Another example of how the notion of social responsibility prevents the peasants from achieving personal dreams is found in the novel *Bến Không Chông* (A Watering Place for Women with No Husband) [first published in 1990, and reprinted in 1999],³⁰ by Dương Hương. The novel portrays the life of a poor peasant, Nguyễn Vạn, who selflessly sacrifices his own happiness for family and national cause. When young, he falls in love with Nhân, but he is not able to marry her because of the hostility between their families. Vạn enlists and participates in the resistance against the French at Điện Biên Phủ. After the French troops are defeated, Vạn, despite having lost his leg, returns home as a war hero and is respected by other villagers. He now has a chance to be reunited with Nhân, who is a widow with three children. He knows that she is still in love with him, but he restrains himself from individual happiness

²⁹ Lê Lưu, '*Tâm Huyết và Mong Ước của Một Đời Văn*' (Confidence and Expectation of a Literary Life) in Hà Minh Đức (ed.), *Nhà Văn Nói về Tác Phẩm* (Writers Talk about Literary Works). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1998. Pp. 441-451.

³⁰ The novel was awarded a literary prize by the Vietnamese Writers' Association in 1991, together with two other novels; *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh* (Sorrow of War) by Bảo Ninh and *Mảnh Đất Lắm Người Nhiều Ma* (A Plot of Land with Many People and ghost) by Nguyễn Khắc Trường.

because he is afraid that it would create a bad reputation for the war hero and Communist cadre. The attempt to live up to social standards and morality causes him to commit suicide at the end of the story. Due to loneliness, he cannot resist Hạnh, a girl he loves like his own daughter. On finding out that she is pregnant by him, he is unable to bear the feeling of guilt and shame and kills himself.

In a similar way to Giang Minh Sài, Nguyễn Văn is bound by an invisible tie, namely the responsibility for the family and society strongly emphasised in Vietnamese culture. Hồ Chí Minh once stressed that the moral of Communism was '*to be concerned with the people's welfare, 'strictly opt for collective interest' and be always ready to 'suffer before the people' and 'enjoy happiness after the people.'*'³¹ The concept of familial responsibility, which is influenced by Confucianism, was strengthened even more during the Socialist development. According to Marr, Vietnamese Communists in the early 20th century tended to fight against French colonisation more than did Confucianism. The ambiguity between Confucianism and Marxism was advantageous for political struggles led by Vietnamese Communists. The importance of familial ties was often referred to in the speeches of Ho Chi Minh. He symbolically made a comparison: '*Since no one can divide the members of one family; therefore, 'no one can divide our Vietnam.'*'³²

The quest for individual happiness in *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) and *Bến Không Chông* (A Watering Place for Women with No Husband) involves not challenging the concept of collectivism, but rather calling for the recognition of the existence of individuals in society. The demand for individual rights emphasised in these two novels is not as extreme as the demand for individual rights made by the Self-Reliant Literary group in the 1930s. For example, in *Đoạn Tuyệt* (Breaking the Tie) [1935], Nhất Linh strongly opposes arranged marriages and defends the individual's right to choose his or her partner.³³ By the same author, *Bướm Trắng* (White Butterfly) [first published in a newspaper from 1939-1949, and reprinted in 1989] shows the alienation of an individual towards society. Trương, the protagonist in the novel, is

³¹ Quoted in Nguyễn Khắc Viện, 'Confucianism and Marxism' in *Vietnamese Studies*, no. 111, 1994. Pp. 61-62. This is an excerpt from Ho Chi Minh's speech at the opening of the Rectification campaign in April 1961.

³² Quoted in Marr, David G. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981. P.133.

³³ More detail for the discussion of this novel, see in Jamieson, Neil L. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.

characterised as an extreme individualist who would never conform to any accepted standards and values. Although Lê Lựu and Dương Hương stress the individual's right to be happy and pursue his or her personal dreams, they still underline the individual's awareness and responsibility towards the collective. For example, it is shown in *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) that the collective concern is put above personal demands. Sài chooses to return to the village and work for the agricultural commune instead of searching for personal happiness.

Lê Lựu and Dương Hương look at peasants with sympathy. As quoted above, the political officer Đỗ Mạnh in *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) comments that Sài fails to pursue personal happiness because he is a landless peasant who is used to being passive and needing directions from employers or landowners. Similarly, it seems that the miseries and loneliness of Nguyễn Vạn stems from his consent to the rigid ideology and social requirements. However, it is argued by the authors that the failure to grasp happiness is due not only to the submissiveness of the peasants, but also to the inevitability of history. In wartime, the destiny of peasants, like other Vietnamese people, was interlocked with the fate of the nation. As Đỗ Mạnh says, '*It was the norm at the time, and there is no one to blame.*'³⁴

Certain important writers, who have experienced the wartime and political vicissitudes of the pre-1975 period, also share this feeling. For example, Nguyễn Khải writes, '*Sometimes I loved to swim backward or out of the direction. Then again, I found that it was very tiring. So, I brought myself back to the direction and swam along the main stream and together with the collective, because it was safe and fun.*'³⁵ In *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare) [1990] Ngô Ngọc Bội says that everyone, from ordinary peasants to high-ranking political officers, all realised that there was something wrong with the land reform policy but nobody was brave enough to speak out the truth.³⁶ Thus, it can be seen that there was no room for individuals when the survival of the collective was the main concern.

³⁴ Lê Lựu. *A Time far Past*. P. 140.

³⁵ Nguyễn Khải. *Anh Hùng Bĩ Vận* (The Unlucky Hero) in *Tuyển Tập Nguyễn Khải* (The Collection of Nguyễn Khải's works). Vol. 3. Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1996. P. 211.

³⁶ For the discussion of this novel, see Chapter 5.

It should be noted that peasant characters in Lê Lưu and Dương Hương's novels are not depicted as a social class, as those in Socialist Realist literature. However, the individualism stressed in both novels encompasses the plural and collective meaning of the *cái tôi thế hệ* (the individuality of a generation).³⁷ Lê Lưu and Dương Hương express the anguish of the wartime generation who have to suppress their personal dreams and happiness for the survival of the nation.³⁸ At the same time, the writers attempt to illuminate the inner conflicts of 'the peasant in uniforms' and how their dreams are ruined by the war.

Peasants are never described as weak and hopeless in Socialist Realist literature. For example, the short story *Anh Keng* (Mr. Keng) [1963] by Nguyễn Kiên shows the development of the young peasant Keng. He is an ordinary peasant. In the house, he is strictly controlled by his chauvinistic father. When he goes out, he is often mocked by other village teenagers because of his appearance. Generally speaking, he has nothing to be proud of. However, Keng becomes a new man and proves himself to be an acceptable person to other villagers when he participates in the collective farm. As the author makes clear, Keng is accepted and admired because he carries out

³⁷ Critics, such as Bích Thu, used to this term to describe the emphasis of individualism in poems written in the 1970s by young soldier-poets. These poets, such as Thanh Thảo, Xuân Quỳnh, Phạm Tiến Duật and Trần Mạnh Hảo, depicted the realistic picture of the war, and did not glorify the heroism. As they had participated in the war and witnessed loss and death themselves, they asked for the right to speak of the war in the way it was. Their poems are based on personal experiences and individual perspectives. However, it is shown that these poems are dedicated to the whole generation of poets, and soldiers in the resistance to the Americans. They are generally referred to as 'the disadvantaged generation' who never had a chance to enjoy childhood, had to leave school early and join the battlefield. Their poems reflect the dilemma of the generation. That is to say, they believed that it was inevitable that they would join the army and fight for the nation, but they also regretted their lost adolescence during the violent hours between life and death. The poem *Những Người Đi Tới Biển* (Those who Arrive the Sea) by Thanh Thảo can be example.

*Chúng tôi đã đi không tiếc đời mình
(Nhưng tuổi hai mươi làm sao không tiếc)
Nhưng ai cũng tiếc tuổi hai mươi thì còn chi Tổ quốc?
We went and did not regret our lives
(but the life at the age of 20, how could we not regret)
But if everybody regrets the age of 20, still the nation exists?*

The idea of *cái tôi thế hệ* is also applicable to the study of prose fiction, as novelists and short story writers also share this dilemma. See more in Bích Thu, *Theo Dòng Văn Học* (Follow the Stream of Literature). Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1998. Pp.11-51.

³⁸ For example, it is noted in Nguyễn Minh Châu's diary that he had to give up personal yearning and reminded himself throughout the whole period of war that the first priority was to obtain national independence, as shown in his words, 'Today we fight for the right of the whole nation. Tomorrow, we will fight for the right of each person, and to make human being better day by day. From Vương Trí Nhàn, 'Sự Dũng Cảm Rất Điềm Dạm - Nguyễn Minh Châu và Nghề Văn' (The Calm Bravery- Nguyễn Minh Châu and Literary Career) in *Nguyễn Minh Châu, Nguyễn Khải*. Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998. P. 39.

uncomplainingly the tasks that the collective farm assigned to him, and never bothers with the idea that he has to work harder than the others. After being appointed as chairman of a collective farm, Keng manages to break loose from his father's control. He then marries and has a family of his own. This is a typically Socialist Realist tale of how peasants can gain happiness and improve their social status. The predictable solution involves being a part of the community, showing concern about collective affairs and uncomplainingly working for the community.

Lê Lưu and Dương Hương's novels approach the peasants in a different way. In their works, the peasants are allowed to be weak, sad and exhausted. The two novelists focus on the fall of the heroes and argue that the excessive concern for the collective prevents the peasants from achieving personal happiness. Both characters, Giang Minh Sài and Nguyễn Vạn, are war heroes who enjoy compliments and respect from people in their villages. Nguyễn Vạn is given a big house expropriated from a rich landowner during the land reform. Sài enjoys popularity as a war hero and a successful chairman of the co-operative. He is interviewed by newspapers several times and applauded by the public for his heroic deeds while fighting in the front, and the success of the co-operative he takes charge of. Nevertheless, both characters are unhappy because their personal dreams remain unfulfilled.

2.2.3. *The Transformation of Literary Generation*

Authorial background is a key factor in the construction of the images of peasants in Vietnamese literature. To explain this issue, we have to look back to the process of Vietnamese revolution and try to understand its connection with literary activities during wartime. Through the long struggle for national independence, intellectuals, writers and artists were not attracted to the revolution led by the Communist party because of the Socialist goal of building a classless society or the belief in 'the dictatorship of the proletariat.' In fact, it was nationalism and moral aspects that drew them to the revolution. The writers wanted to obtain national freedom first in order that afterwards they could enjoy individual freedom in an independent state, as is clearly shown in the words of the revolutionary writer, Nguyễn Đình Thi. He relates individual freedom to national independence as follow: '*I think that in our country individual emancipation cannot be separated from national liberation. National*

*liberation is actually the liberation for individuals as it gives dignity to each person.*³⁹

In addition to this, Vietnamese writers were influenced by the belief that literature should have a moral function and enrich humanitarian aspects. Therefore, the Communist party's aims of fighting for national freedom and emancipating the peasants from the oppression of the Colonial administration and feudal landlords were appealing to many intellectuals and writers. For example, Nguyễn Công Hoan disclosed the reason why he was fascinated by the revolution and Marxist ideas. He wrote, *'The more I am familiar with those political prisoners ... the more I understand that Communism is humanitarian, and class struggle is actually the struggle to liberate the nation and the people.'*⁴⁰ Consequently, writing about the problems of peasants and the countryside became a means for these writers to take part in the national struggle and to defend humanistic and moralistic ideas.

X Since the Communist Party took over the northern part of Vietnam in 1945, writers, regarded as bourgeois, were not allowed to write about themselves, but were, however, encouraged to write about the majority of Vietnamese masses, the peasants. Therefore, they had to write for peasants and sometimes even have to imitate peasants' worldview. To many intellectual revolutionaries and urban-based writers, the peasants are almost completely strangers. Although they knew about the life of peasants by having lived and worked with them during their trips, they barely understood their mentality. As is shown through the narratives of this period, the writers could depict the peasants only from what they have seen as outsiders. The well-known critic, Lại Nghiên Ân, labels the outcome of these writers' attempts to convey the life of the rural masses, soldiers and workers as *'văn học tư liệu'* (Documentary Literature), meaning that they merely transformed information and facts into the form of fiction.⁴¹

³⁹ Nguyễn Đình Thi, 'Công Cuộc Giải Phóng Dân Tộc đã Thực Sự Góp Phần Giải Phóng cho Con Người' (The National Liberation Has Truly Contributed to a Man's liberation) in *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no. 9, 1999. P. 4.

⁴⁰ Nguyễn Công Hoan. *Đời Viết Văn của Tôi* (My Literary Life). Ho Chi Minh city: NXB Văn Nghệ, 1996. P. 219.

⁴¹ Lại Nghiên Ân, 'Nội Dung Thể Tài và Sự Phát Triển Thể Loại trong Nền Văn Học Việt Nam Mới' (Themes and the Development of Genre in New Literature) in Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh et al. *Một Thời Đại Văn Học Mới* (A New Period of Literature) Hanoi: NXB Hanoi, 1987. Pp. 144-148.

Thus, the transformation of generations of writers, from intellectual urban-based to peasant-originated, can be an explanation for the changes found in the stories on peasants and the countryside in the post-1975 period. It is evident that the generation of urban-based writers, mostly born into the scholar-gentry class, were replaced by writers originating from a country peasant background. These writers, such as Nguyễn Minh Châu, Lê Lưu, and Nguyễn Khắc Trường, mostly started their careers in the 1960s and, by the 1980s, had matured in their literary profession and become well established in literary circles.⁴² With their experience and profound understanding of peasants and the countryside, these writers contributed significantly to the development of the representation of the peasants and countryside in the post-war literature. Moreover, some less successful writers from an older generation, such as Ngô Ngọc Bội, Nguyễn Kiên and Nguyễn Hữu Nhân, proudly declared that they were 'nhà văn nông dân' (the writers of peasants).⁴³

Thạch Lam, a well-known writer in the 1930s, said that only writers who were born and lived in the countryside could understand and depict a realistic picture of the peasants. It is worth quoting his comment here:

I am disappointed and have to accept that countryside people have not yet appeared in literature. We have to wait for a writer who originates from the rice field and ploughs the land by himself, to tell us about rural people and to plough a direct and daring furrow in fertile soil, and not allow any ideological influence from the outside to interfere with him. This person will have enough courage to present us with Vietnamese peasants, and activities behind the bamboo hedges. It is not just to live with the countryside people and then we can understand them. A shallow judgement can only touch upon the

⁴²According to the critic, Ngô Thảo, the Renovation literature, namely the literature since 1986, is participated in by roughly four generation of writers. The first generation is those who started their writing career before the French Resistance (before 1946), such as Tô Hoài and Tố Hữu. The second is the writers who started writing after the outbreak of the French Resistance (since 1946), which includes Nguyễn Khải and Nguyễn Minh Châu. The third is the writers who began to write during the Vietnam War (roughly in the late 1960s). And the fourth generation emerged after the announcement of the Renovation policy, such Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Bảo Ninh and Phạm Thị Hoài. It can be noticed that the second and third generations mostly are male writers were born in peasant families and joined the army. There are more female and urban-based writers emerged in the fourth generation. However, it can be said that post-war literature is still dominated by established writers from the second and third generations. Summarised from Ngô Thảo, 'Bốn Thế Hệ Nhà Văn' (Four Generations of Writers) in *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no. 9, 1995. Pp. 21-23.

⁴³ Ngô Thảo and Lại Nguyên Ân (ed). *Nhà Văn Việt Nam: Chân Dung Tự Hoạ* (The Self-Portrait of Vietnamese Writers). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1995.

superficial level. We need to observe from the inside and go deeply into the mystery of those souls.⁴⁴

These writers of peasant background give a more realistic and complex depiction of peasants and a profound understanding of the countryside conflict. The case of the prominent writer Nguyễn Minh Châu and his construction of the well-known peasant character, Khúng, is an excellent illustration of this suggestion.

Nguyễn Minh Châu (1930-1989) came from a farming family and grew up in the countryside, but did not use peasants as main characters in his work until he wrote two famous short stories in the mid-1980s: *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest who Lives Far Away) [1984] and *Phiện Chợ Giát* (The Giát Market) [1989]. In wartime, he was known as a soldier writer because he was a soldier himself, and most of his works are about war and soldiers. Nguyễn Minh Châu started a literary career in the 1960s when Socialist Realism was sanctified in the literary domain of Vietnam. As a result, he was unavoidably influenced by this literary style of writing and could not break away from the socio-political context within which he lived. Heroism and voluntarism were the main focus of Nguyễn Minh Châu's early works, such as *Cửa Sông* (Water Gate) [1966], *Mảnh Trăng Cuối Rừng* (The Crescent Moon at the End of the Forest) [1970], and *Dấu Chân Người Lính* (The Soldiers' Footprints) [1972].

Even though some of Nguyễn Minh Châu's works are not directly related to peasants and the countryside, peasants are always there, at least in the background of the story. It is evident that Nguyễn Minh Châu is always concerned about peasants' well-being, particularly their dream of having a better life. An example is the short story *Người Đàn Bà Trên Chuyến Tàu Tốc Hành* (A Woman on the Express Train) [1982]. The main theme of the story is how Quỳ, a medical officer, was affected by the memory of the war. However, the episode on Quỳ's husband, a young soldier, illustrates Nguyễn Minh Châu's sympathy for peasants and his wish to rescue them from hardship and backward conditions. The young boy was born and grew up in the countryside where the newest examples of technology found in the countryside at the time were the '*dèn dầu hoả*' (oil lamp) and the '*xe cút kít*' (wheelbarrow). The young boy dreamed of

⁴⁴ Thạch Lam, 'Người Nhà Quê trong Văn Chương' (The Rural People in Literature) in *Thạch Lam: Văn và Đời* (Thạch Lam: Literary Works and Life). Hanoi: NXB Hà Nội, 1999. P. 609. The article first appeared in the collected Writings, *Theo Dòng* (Follow the stream) in 1941.

being an engineer so that he could invent a ploughing machine for his mother and other peasants in his village. However, he had to leave school early and join the army. He was killed in the battlefield, and his dream of building the ploughing machine was left unfulfilled.

The short story *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest who Lives Far Away) is the first in which Nguyễn Minh Châu concentrated on peasants and their struggle against poverty. Soon after being published, the short story and its main character, the peasant Khúng, were widely discussed by the reading public. The author received many compliments as well as enduring criticism. The story is about the life of Khúng, a peasant in the central region of Vietnam, from his childhood until he got married and had his own family. Later, his story continues in *Phiên Chợ Giát* (The Giát market), first published in the collection of short stories *Cỏ Lau* (Lau Grass), which Nguyễn Minh Châu finished on his deathbed. A major contribution of *Khách ở Quê Ra* and *Phiên Chợ Giát* is to give a realistic portrayal of peasants through the character, Khúng, and to unveil their involvement in the Socialist development and how their lives were affected by political upheavals.

Through the character of Khúng, the author gives a comprehensive account of the development of Vietnamese peasants in the long history of struggle and the process of socio-political change. Though it is not exactly indicated by the author, we can guess from the content that the story of Khúng began in the 1960s when agrarian reforms were widely carried out in the North, and people in almost every part of the country were affected by the impact of the war. The author ended the story approximately in the early 1980s, when the war between Vietnam and Cambodia finished and the whole country suffered from economic hardship.

It is believed that the characterisation of Khúng was inspired by the characteristics of the peasants in Nguyễn Minh Châu's village. The Khôi village in the story bears a resemblance to the Thới village where Nguyễn Minh Châu was born and grew up. Nguyễn Minh Châu confided in his colleagues a few days before he passed away that he wrote about the peasants in order to express gratitude to the people in his village

and to return to his peasant origin. Nguyễn Minh Châu also intended to write further about Khúng if he survived his illness.⁴⁵

The protagonist, Khúng, is depicted as a typical Vietnamese peasant; he is hard working, economical, but can be tyrannical and small-minded. However, he is radical enough to challenge the traditional belief and turn his back on the criticism of the whole village by building a house in the area of the village temple and marrying a pregnant woman. Khúng goes to the unexploited forest, and turns deserted land into a farming area. As the author implies, it is actually peasants like Khúng, who though backward, tend to persevere and create history and produce food to feed the whole nation solely by their rough hands.

Because he needs money for Lạc, his son who is facing financial difficulty, Khúng decides to sell the old bull that has been serving his farm so long that it is regarded as a member of the family. This small detail shows that, from generation to generation, Vietnamese peasants still have to struggle to make a living. From the old peasant Khúng to his son, they still have to leave their home village and look for land in a new economic zone.⁴⁶ On the journey to the Giát market, old Khúng has a nightmare in which he is transformed into a bull. After awaking from the fearful dream, he realises that he and the bull share the same destiny: they work hard and sacrifice their lives for nothing. Khúng decides to free the bull by leaving it in the jungle. He is delighted by an idea that the faithful animal would enjoy its freedom in the remote forest.

The relationship between Khúng and the bull is a relationship between master and slave. The analysis of the dialectical relationship between Lordship and Bondage in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* is probably a helpful way to understand Khúng's motif to free the bull. Hegel believed that both master and slave struggled equally to be recognised by each other. As for the lord, his existence would be recognised by his having recognised the existence and dependence of the bondman.⁴⁷ Likewise, for Khúng, to liberate the bull is to liberate himself from suffering and the

⁴⁵ Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, 'Những Ngày Cuối Cùng Gặp Nguyễn Minh Châu' (Meeting with Nguyễn Minh Châu in His Last Days) in *Nhà Văn và Tác Phẩm trong Trường Phố Thông: Nguyễn Minh Châu and Nguyễn Khải* (Writers and Literary works in High School: Nguyễn Minh Châu and Nguyễn Khải). Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998. Pp. 46-50.

⁴⁶ During the 1960s, the Communist government tried to move people from the densely populated areas to the mountain areas in order to create new farming space and set up co-operatives.

⁴⁷ Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Miller, A. V. (trans.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Pp. 111-119. Thanks to Prof. Hoàng Ngọc Hiến for showing this point.

economic hardship that he has to endure all of his life. However, at the end of story, Khúng is disappointed to find out that the bull he tried to set free eventually found its way back to the village. The sense of loyalty and nature of slave brings the bull back to its master.

The disillusionment of Khúng is also due to the death of Dững, his eldest son, who was killed in the war in Cambodia. Nguyễn Minh Châu tries to illustrate how the war involved and affected the peasants. Due to being blinded by the glorification of the war, Khúng enthusiastically encourages his son to enlist in the army. He is proud and boasts of his son. After the death of Dững, Khúng realises that the war is not only about heroism but is also about loss and death. Dững's old worn backpack looks like the backpack of a beggar rather than the backpack of a war hero. Inside it, there are no valuables and no sign of heroism, only pieces of wood and stones that Dững collected from Cambodia. These things are unfamiliar to Khúng and leave him asking why his son had to die in such an unknown place. Readers may find it poignant when Madame Hái, a neighbour, tries to console old Khúng by saying that he has sacrificed just one child while she has lost three of her sons in the war. From this detail, the author is pointing out that the majority of those who sacrificed in wars were the children of the peasants. The peasants contributed a great deal to the national struggle, as they sacrificed even the lives of their children.

In the third part of *Phiên Chợ Giát*, the author concentrates on depicting the relationship between Khúng and Mr. Bời, a district chairman. From Khúng's viewpoint, Nguyễn Minh Châu subtly shows his dissatisfaction with government policy on agricultural development and recalls the failure of collectivisation. Mr. Bời comes to the village with the intention of turning peasants like Khúng into 'new Socialist men'. The economic system introduced by Mr. Bời cannot convince the peasant, but he has to accept that 'it is difficult to have someone understand and exploit the mentality of peasants in such a way he (Mr. Bời) does'.⁴⁸

Nguyễn Minh Châu goes further that the agricultural policy introduced by the party was not successful because it did not respond to the demands of peasants. Also, the party did not listen to the complaints and views of the people, as shown in the story.

⁴⁸ Nguyễn Minh Châu. *Phiên Chợ Giát* (The Giát Market) in *Tuyển Tập Truyện Ngắn* (The Collection of Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1999. P. 621.

Despite all the mistakes made by political leaders, an ordinary peasant like Khúng has to keep quiet and bear in mind the saying, '*Never laugh at your leaders*'. Here it is quite obvious that Nguyễn Minh Châu expresses his dissatisfaction with the arrogance and tyranny of officials. Nguyễn Minh Châu reminded the party officials not to forget that the revolution was completed not only by the party and revolutionaries like Mr. Bồi, but also by the contribution of ordinary peasants like Khúng and Madame Hải.

Through the character, Khúng, peasants are not only seen as the victims of society but are also criticised for their negative qualities. The history of Vietnam owed its victory over foreign troops to the significant contribution of peasants, but at the same time, the country also regressed due to the conservatism of the peasant mentality. Even the Socialist model of modernisation was unable to eliminate the conservatism of the peasants and change them into Socialists. On the other hand, the revolution was also hindered by certain peasant ideologies, such as being conservative and resistant to the new developments. As Nguyễn Minh Châu remarks elsewhere:

Our conservatism does not come from the outside, but it is actually inborn. It controls everything from politics, philosophy, science, culture, literature and art...It means trifle, superficiality, and lack of vision...The peasants have a great heart but sometimes they can be really cruel. The peasant would love to be a king, a god or a lord. If he could, he would be the king of a country, many countries, or the whole world, but if not, it would still be better for him to be a king in a province, district, sub-district, village, or even in a house...⁴⁹

In one of his works, Nguyễn Minh Châu refers to the Chinese writer Liu Xin⁵⁰ with appreciation, saying '*Liu Xin exposed the personality of his nation which is obviously*

⁴⁹ Quoted in Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, 'Những Ngày Cuối Cùng Gặp Nguyễn Minh Châu' (Meeting with Nguyễn Minh Châu in His Last Days) in *Nhà Văn và Tác Phẩm trong Trường Phổ Thông: Nguyễn Minh Châu and Nguyễn Khải* (Writers and Literary works in High School: Nguyễn Minh Châu and Nguyễn Khải). P. 49. In fact, it is not only Nguyễn Minh Châu who commented that Vietnamese society was preoccupied by the peasant ideology. In 1997, General Trần Độ, a political dissident, sent a 13-page letter to the party leaders and government. The main content of the letter included the demand for democracy. He commented '...our Party members, especially those in top leading positions, have been inflicted heavily (yet unconsciously) with the little peasant mentality (small-mindedness and jealousy) and the ugly habits of the feudal society (craving for fame and ranks).' (Quoted from www.fva.org)

⁵⁰ Liu Xin (1881-1936) is regarded as a founder of modern Chinese literature as well as a political commentator. His major works, such as *A Madman's Diary*, *The True story of AQ* and *The New Year's Sacrifice*, tells about oppressed peasants in Chinese feudal society. His short stories and critical essays

not so elegant. But, by so doing, Liu Xin unfathomably loves the Chinese. He loves his compatriots.⁵¹ In a similar way to Liu Xin, who created absurd peasant characters, Nguyễn Minh Châu did not mean to look down on the peasants by portraying the unpleasant characteristics and bad qualities of Khúng. Instead, it shows his understanding and realistic view of peasants. Khúng is a representative of what Vietnamese peasants really are, not what the party wants them to be. Hence, the character, Khúng, shows the complexity of Vietnamese peasants in that they are more than the patriotic, loyal and industrious masses, often described in the novels and short stories of the period 1945-1975.

Nguyễn Minh Châu, despite his criticism of peasants' worldview, has a strong belief in the peasants, as shown in this depiction of Khúng and in his writing about Chí Phèo, the peasant character in a short story by Nam Cao (1917-1951). According to Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, Nguyễn Minh Châu's belief in the determination of peasants is manifested in the scene in which Khúng takes the bull to sell for slaughter at the Giát market. Though travelling during the night when the sky was dark, with his experience, sensibility and doggedness, the old peasant managed to travel in the right direction and arrive at his destination.⁵² In addition, Nguyễn Minh Châu's belief in the good qualities of the peasants is evidently expressed in his view on Nam Cao, the author of the well-known short story *Chí Phèo*. In an article, Nguyễn Minh Châu expresses that he would not let Chí Phèo die in disgrace as Nam Cao does.⁵³ In his version, Chí Phèo would be rescued from deterioration, join the revolution and become a good citizen. Chí Phèo would then take part in defending his village from attack by the foreign troops.⁵⁴ Through the imagination and reconstruction of this well-known fictional character, it is shown that Nguyễn Minh Châu has a strong faith in peasants' morale and strength.

on literature had a significant influence on the Vietnamese Realist Movement in the early twentieth century.

⁵¹ Nguyễn Minh Châu, 'Ngồi Buồn Viết mà Chơi' (Writing while Sitting Lonely) in Tôn Phương Lan (ed.), *Trang Giấy Trước Đèn* (Paper in front of the Light). Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1994. Pp. 141-142.

⁵² Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, 'Đọc Nguyễn Minh Châu từ *Bức Tranh* đến *Phiên Chợ Giát*' (Reading Nguyễn Minh Châu from *The Portrait* to *The Giát Market*) in *Văn Học và Học Văn* (Literature and Studying Literature). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1997. P. 250.

⁵³ See the discussion on Chí Phèo in the first chapter.

⁵⁴ Nguyễn Minh Châu, 'Nam Cao' in Tôn Phương Lan (ed.), *Trang Giấy Trước Đèn* (Papers in front of the Light). Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1994. Pp. 191-206.

The complexity of peasant characters is also well demonstrated in Ngô Ngọc Bội's award-winning short story, *Chuyện của Ông Lão Thường Dân* (The Story of an Ordinary Man) [1986]. In it, the author tells how an old peasant, Lão Thụ, who tries to protect social justice and righteousness. But, with his simplistic mind, the story ends with tragedy.

Lão Thụ is asked by his youngest daughter, Hoàn, who marries a high-ranking official and lives in town, to help her look after the construction of her new house. However, after having discovered that Hoàn and her husband are building the new house with the money they have gained from corruption, he refuses to get involved with their business and decides to go back to the countryside. At the same time, he feels very disappointed with the behaviours of many corrupt officials, who use their position to seek personal benefits.

He never dreamed of having such a luxurious house. He just wishes that he could travel comfortably by public transports, to visit his family and friends, and to do sightseeing in the country, which its survival owes to his contribution (He is Điện Biên Phủ veteran and his four sons fought in the Vietnam War). However, ten years of peace has passed by, there is nothing better. He feels tired and disappointed.⁵⁵

On the way back to his home, Lão Thụ decides that he has to finalise a problem that has been bothering him for long. He is required by the collective farm to return a buffalo that he was assigned to look after since it was a small calf. But, he has a special bond with this young buffalo and he is afraid that, after having been returned to the co-operative, it will be given to another villager whose buffalo, also provided by the co-operative, died last year because of his negligence. He plans to take the buffalo to his friend's place in a neighbouring village. Lão Thụ poisons his own dog, which has been looking after his ducks and guarding his house for ten years, in order to make the local officials and other villagers believe that his house is broken in and the buffalo is stolen.

⁵⁵ Ngô Ngọc Bội. *Chuyện của Ông Lão Thường Dân* (The Story of an Ordinary Man). Published in *Người Đàn Bà Quỳ: Tập Truyện-Ký chọn lọc* (A Woman Kneels: A Collection of Short stories and Reportages). Hanoi: NXB Nông Nghiệp, 1988. Pp. 64-65.

However, on the way to his friend's place, he happens to hear the self-criticism session taking place in the co-operative office. A member of the co-operative administration is accused of corruption. Lão Thụ is interested in what he is hearing and keeps listening until it is dawn. Then, he realises that it is too late now to take the buffalo to the hiding place as he may be witnessed by other villagers. He takes the buffalo back home and discovers that the dog he had poisoned a few hours earlier, is lying dead just in front of his house.

Ngô Ngọc Bội's short story is interesting in the way he shows the contradictory characteristics of Lão Thụ. On the one hand, Lão Thụ is concerned about social justice. His view of the corruption is critical and compromising, even with his own daughter. But, on the other hand, he had the dog poisoned in order to save the buffalo from the irresponsible neighbour. As the narrator points out at the end of the story, Lão Thụ's action is not justified although he has a good intention.

With his peasant origins and experience of working as a cadre for political movements in the countryside for a long period, Ngô Ngọc Bội shows a profound understanding of the peasants. His character, Lão Thụ, represents Vietnamese peasants in general. He is socially concerned and never hesitates to contribute to the nation whenever he is required. As the author states at the beginning of the story, Lão Thụ not only does the military service but also gives his land to the co-operative. As the story is finished in 1986, it reveals the frustration of the peasants during the decline of the co-operative system. The co-operative is criticised for its failure to protect its property and animals from both the corruption of officials and the negligence of villagers. For Lão Thụ, as a good member of the co-operative, he realises that it is also his responsibility to look after the property of the co-operative, but with his short vision and simplistic mind, he not only fails to keep the buffalo but also kills his own dog. Ngô Ngọc Bội uses the character Lão Thụ to make an analysis between the strong and weak points of Vietnamese peasants.

As shown through the characterisation of peasants in the works by Nguyễn Minh Châu and Ngô Ngọc Bội, authorial background plays a vital role in shaping a new image of peasants in post-1975 literature. However, socio-political changes in post-war society also have a great influence on writers' attitude towards peasants. This is

manifestly reflected in the rewriting of peasants in Nguyễn Khai's stories, as will be examined in the next part of the chapter.

2.2.4. Socio-political Disenchantment in Post-war Society

One factor creating changes in the representation of peasants and the countryside in literature was the political disillusionment shared by Vietnamese people from every social stratum in the post-1975 society. Apparently, it had a significant influence on the writing of peasants of the old avant-garde, such as Nguyễn Khải. In wartime, writers usually looked at peasants as a social class whose force and contribution was important for the survival of the nation. However, it is obvious that at that time there was a wide gap between writers and peasants. In literary texts written between 1945 and 1975, writers referred to peasants in two extreme ways: either to criticise or idealise them. That is to say, on the one hand, some writers regarded peasants as a backward class of small-minded landowners. Some writers believed that they knew better than peasants and they had the right to tell peasants what to do and what not to do. On the other hand, some writers humbled themselves before peasants whom they idealised as the heroes of Vietnamese revolution.

According to the French scholar, Boudarel, the atmosphere of the Renovation period in the 1980s was similar to the intellectual movement of the 1950s.⁵⁶ This is an interesting remark because both the advocates of the Renovation and the participants of the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair demanded freedom of expression from state control. Moreover, the intellectual dissidence in the 1950s and the literary movement in the late 1980s indicated not only a reaction of writers and intellectuals against the party line in literary activity and intellectual life, but also an attempt to change the role and status of the intelligentsia in post-war society after it had been suppressed under the so-called '*dictatorship of the proletariat*'. However, it can be said that the political disenchantment of the post-war period was not limited to a group of intellectual elites and writers, for it had also expanded to the majority of peasants. Both intellectuals and peasants were more or less disillusioned by the conflict between Socialist ideal and socio-political reality in post-1975 society.

⁵⁶Boudarel, Georges. *Cent Fleurs Ecloses dans la Nuit du Vietnam, Communisme et Dissidence 1954-1956*. Jacques Berton, 1991.

Vietnamese from all social classes, writers and peasants included, were subjected to the rhetoric of the Communist party. In the event, they were disappointed by unfulfilled promises. The main reason why intellectual writers decided to devote themselves to the Socialist revolution and fight against French colonialism and so-called American imperialism was the hope that they would regain individual freedom when the country was liberated. Nevertheless, these writers had to be dismayed by the authoritarian government and limited freedom of expression they encountered in the post-revolutionary period. As for the peasants, it is generally believed that they supported the revolution mainly for materialistic reasons.⁵⁷ Peasants enthusiastically joined the revolution because they believed they would have a better life and that poverty would be alleviated in a new regime where they would be treated with more respect and equality. Unfortunately, they were disappointed because although the foreign troops were defeated and the country was unified, their dream remains unfulfilled and their sacrifice is not yet rewarded.

Thus, this post-war despair has created a closer relationship between writers and peasants. It is evident that in the post-1975 period writers began to show more understanding of peasants, and the gap between writers and peasants narrowed. Writers now looked at peasants as companions, who once shared an effort to build an idealistic regime, and then shared disillusionment when their mutual dream to build a better society was not yet achieved. Moreover, 'rethinking' is a key word in the Renovation period. Vietnamese history is reviewed and re-evaluated with a more objective view. Vietnamese literati attempt to make fairer judgements of literary works and writers that were unfairly treated in wartime, such as the so-called 'decadent bourgeois writers' of the Self-Reliant Literary group and those who were involved in the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair. The works of these writers are allowed to be reprinted in the Renovation period. However, the most striking example of rethinking is the case of Nguyễn Khải and the change in his attitude towards peasants. This part of the study will focus on Nguyễn Khải's rewriting of his peasant character, Tuy Kiển, in *Cái Thời Lãng Mạn* (The Romantic Time) [1987]. This character first appeared in *Tâm Nhìn Xa* (The Far Vision) [1963].

⁵⁷ For example, Bùi Tín, a former Northern Colonel, believed that the campaign of land reform in the early 1950s became successful propaganda with the army because many soldiers were poor peasants. These low-ranking soldiers worked as porters who played an important role at Điện Biên Phủ. They were enthusiastic for the tasks in the army because they believed that they would be given land. From Bùi Tín. *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoir of a Northern Vietnamese Colonel*. Translated and adapted by Judy Stowe and Do Van. London: Hurst & Company, 1995. P. 23.

Nguyễn Khải wrote the short story *Cái Thời Lãng Mạn* (The Romantic Time) in order to apologise for the peasant character Tuy Kiền, the main character in the short story *Tâm Nhìn Xa* (The Far Vision) which was written 20 years earlier. The theme of the story is similar to that of many literary works written in the 1960s, in that it criticises the peasants' attachment to the ownership of land and supports the collectivisation in the countryside. The short story *Tâm Nhìn Xa* (The Far Vision) is set in a village collective farm in the sub-district of Đồng Tiến in the province of Phú Thọ. The characters in the story are constructed from the real people that the author encountered during his stay in the countryside.⁵⁸

Nguyễn Khải is an observant writer. Some of his contemporaries only tried to respond to the party policies on peasants and agriculture and did not bother themselves with how peasants actually lived and thought. As a result, most portrayals of peasants appearing in literary works during the 1960s are vague and lacking in detail. Although Nguyễn Khải, like his contemporaries, also tried to illustrate party policies, he paid close attention to the small details of peasants and their daily activities. This is reflected in the portrayal of the character Tuy Kiền. Nguyễn Khải examines Tuy Kiền's characteristics and mentality not only from his inner thoughts, but also his appearance and gestures. For example, the author describes how chauvinistic and patriarchal the peasant is from the way he sits or the clothes he wears, as shown in the excerpt below:

He (Tuy Kiền) was sitting comfortably on the chair with a mincing manner, though wearing dirty patched blue pants and a brown shirt without sleeves. Considering the luxurious furniture displayed in the house, he might be mistaken for a guest, not the host. But, who could imagine the innocent pride in his mind while stretching his black legs which were covered in dust from the surface of the shiny lacquered chair: 'Though I am wearing torn clothes like a beggar, I am the deputy chairman of a collective farm, and when I am

⁵⁸ It is not unusual for Nguyễn Khải to use the real names of people and settings. The poet Trần Đăng Khoa comments that Nguyễn Khải is a '*nhà văn thông tấn*' (a writer who acts as a reporter) because his stories are usually modelled on real people or real events rather than from his imagination. However, this is not to demean the dignity of Nguyễn Khải. According to Trần Đăng Khoa, this is a unique feature that differentiates Nguyễn Khải's works from other writers. See more in Trần Đăng Khoa. *Chân Dung và Đối Thoại*. (The Portraits and Conversations). 11th edition. Hanoi: NXB: Thanh Niên, 1999. P. 125-126.

back home, I am still the head of my family'. That was the happiness of a person who felt that he had plenty of power, did not depend on anybody, and could do whatever he wanted.⁵⁹

Tuy Kiền is conservative, and Nguyễn Khải, as a narrator of the story, clearly points out that it is not easy to sway the beliefs and change the habits of the peasant. He also believes that the conservatism of the peasants would be an obstacle to the development and improvement of living conditions in the countryside. For instance, an architect, who is sent to improve and build an office for the collective farm, tries to convince Tuy Kiền that it was not hygienic for the whole family to live in the same room, and even proposed to design a plan for Tuy Kiền's new house. The peasant does not only reject the architect's offer, but also mocks at the young architect. Here is Tuy Kiền's argument:

An old couple with some children do not need many rooms. We do not stay at home all day long like people in the city. We spend time in the rice field and we are still very busy when we are back home. Moreover, a house with many rooms is just like a hotel, isn't it?⁶⁰

It is undeniable that the short story *Tâm Nhìn Xa* (The Far Vision) is a piece of work that entailed a lot of research and close observation of the peasants' way of life and mentality. It also reflects Nguyễn Khải's understanding of peasants and the problems of agricultural collectivisation. The negative points of Tuy Kiền mentioned in the story are realistic, but it is just one side of the story. Nguyễn Khải chose to represent the bad qualities of the peasant, but he omitted to mention the good ones. Also, he chose to reveal only half of the real situation in the countryside. It was not until the late 1980s that the other side of the picture unfolded. It is noticeable that Nguyễn Khải's attitude towards the peasants changes dramatically in the short story, *Cái Thời Lãng Mạn* (The Romantic Time), which was written 24 years after his first visit to Đồng Tiến village.

⁵⁹ Nguyễn Khải. *Tâm Nhìn Xa* (Far Vision) in *Tuyển Tập Truyện Ngắn Nguyễn Khải*. (The Collection of Nguyễn Khải's Short Stories) Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Văn Học, 1999. P. 94.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Cái Thời Lãng Mạn (The Romantic Time) is a revised version of *Tầm Nhìn Xa*. Nguyễn Khải says clearly, right at the beginning of the story, that he tries to review what he thought and wrote about the peasants in *Tầm Nhìn Xa* (The Far Vision). On this visit to Đồng Tiến village, Nguyễn Khải witnessed many changes. For example, the former chairman of the collective farm, Biền, whom he depicts in *Tầm Nhìn Xa* (The Far Vision) as the model of Socialist man, has now become materialistic. In contrast, Nguyễn Khải begins to look at Tuy Kiên, whom in the same story he seriously criticised as selfish and greedy, in a different way. As is shown in the dialogues between the narrator and Phúc, the blind peasant in the story, Nguyễn Khải, realises that the profits that Tuy Kiên is taking from production of the collective farm are very small, compared to his contribution. As a vice-chairman of the collective farm, Tuy Kiên might be able to get a small discount on wood or brick to build his own house, but it is undeniable that he also worked very hard and contributed a great deal to the co-operative. Here is the conversation:

I really admire Biền, the chairman of the co-operative at that time. It is rare to find a man who had power but is not corrupted. Phúc seemingly agrees with me but comments: 'at that time he (Biền) was craving for bigger benefit. Therefore, he ignored all small benefit'.

I ask: 'What do you mean?'

Phúc replies with an indifferent tone: 'the young people are craving for fame whereas the old people are looking for wealth. That is the truth!'

'Then what about Tuy Kiên?'

Phúc smiles and says: 'Well, this man was obviously obsessed with making a profit, but what he took from the collective farm is worth very little. And, he is just like everybody else. We'd better condemn those who contribute nothing, but take a lot more than Tuy Kiên.'⁶¹

The development of Nguyễn Khải's viewpoint about peasants and the countryside reflects his political stance and struggle to be a party writer. In his autobiography *Một Giọt Nắng Nhạt* (A Faded Sunlight) [1988], Nguyễn Khải talks about his family and childhood. He is a son of a government officer, but people around him, including his own father, never treated him equally and respectfully because his mother was a

⁶¹ Nguyễn Khải. *Cái Thời Lãng Mạn* (The Romantic Time) in *Tuyển Tập Nguyễn Khải* (The Collection of Nguyễn Khải's works). Vol. 3. Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1996. P. 176-177.

second wife. This made him feel that he was unwanted and useless. It was the prestige of being a party writer that saved him from the feeling of inferiority and humiliation. During the 1960s, Nguyễn Khải became a prolific writer. He wrote a number of stories about peasants and the countryside, such as *Xung Đột* (The Conflict) [1957, *Hãy Đi Xa Hơn Nữa* (Let Us Go Further) [1963] and *Người Trở Về* (The People who Returned) [1964]. However, the content of these works is not entirely about peasants. In fact, the peasants are only marginal in the stories. What interests Nguyễn Khải is political debates. For him, writing is to respond to government policies. Moreover, writing confirms the meaning of his existence as an official writer.

Even in the post-war period, Nguyễn Khải has remained a prolific writer. Some of his contemporaries, such as Nguyễn Ngọc, stopped writing mainly because they were not familiar with the new tastes of readers. Also, it was difficult for avant-gardes to write about anything other than war and agricultural collectivisation. Even if they wanted to concentrate on the same topics, they had to change the style of writing. Therefore, it is not surprising that many senior writers, such as Nguyễn Kiên and Ngô Ngọc Bội, began to change their writing styles and outlooks. For Nguyễn Khải, rewriting peasants was his attempt to adjust to post-war reading public. Of course, he was not the only writer who presented peasants from a new perspective. However, none of his contemporaries took the step of rewriting his or her work as Nguyễn Khải did.

The change in Nguyễn Khải's works was widely discussed among critics. Some of them suspected that the writer changed his style of writing, after having been a faithful party writer and defending party policy for more than twenty years, because he wanted to revive his literary career and to be accepted by the new reading public and market. For example, the well-known critic Lại Nguyên Ân, referred to Nguyễn Khải's rewriting of his own work as *một cách lắp ráp độc đáo tư liệu* (a unique way of recycling materials).⁶² The Hanoi-based critic, Vương Trí Nhàn, ironically called it *một cách tồn tại trong văn học* (the way to survive in literature).

The tone of Nguyễn Khải's works differs before and after 1975. When Nguyễn Khải declared, *'From 1955 to 1977, I wrote in one way. From 1978 till now I have written*

⁶² Lại Nguyên Ân, 'Nội Dung Thể Tài và Sự Phát Triển Thể Loại trong Nền Văn Học Việt Nam Mới' (The Content of the Topic and the Development of a New Literature) in *Một Thời Đại Văn Học Mới* (The New Period of Literature). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1987. P. 118.

in another way,⁶³ many people would think that the change in his works was planned and calculated. Moreover, for some critics, a new version of Tuy Kiền can be seen as another struggle in Nguyễn Khải's literary career. In the pre-1975 period Nguyễn Khải started his career and became a successful author by writing about peasants. He then attempted to secure his place in the post-1975 literary sphere by rewriting his earlier stories about peasants. This was a means of deconstructing his former self and reconstructing a new one, which would suit a new literary era better. However, these speculations seem unfair to Nguyễn Khải.

If we look at his works produced in the Renovation period in general, we will recognise that his tone has become softer, tired and even sad. Overall, Nguyễn Khải is still a revolutionary writer whose ambition is to create a better society. Nguyễn Khải's works in the post-war is still socially and politically conscious as he always was in the wartime. Nguyễn Khải does not change, but it is the society that changes. As he complains about the change of reading public in the short story *Cái Thời Lãng Mạn* (The Romantic Time) [1987]:

I used to believe that there would not be any changes in my career. The literature of the future would still be Socialist Realist literature. Nobody could doubt it. The readers in the future would be the same as those who had been loyal to my works and the number of readers would perhaps be many times multiplied. Because of the limit of health, I might write more slowly, but I was sure that my work would be accepted by publishers and that I would not lack money...Then suddenly, the manuscript that I had had with the publishing house for half a year was returned. Why? It is because your work is too political and idealistic so it is difficult for readers to buy it. What readers? My readers are still loyal to me!- Your readers are now retired and they don't have enough to live on, let alone buy book.⁶⁴

The post-war society directs itself to Capitalist development whereas the Socialist project is left uncompleted, and quickly replaced by a market economy. Literary

⁶³ The interview of Nguyễn Khải was published in *Văn Nghệ* (16-2-1991). Here quoted from Nguyễn Thị Bình, 'Nguyễn Khải và Tư Duy Tiểu Thuyết' (Nguyễn Khải and Novelistic Ideas) in *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no.7, 1998. P. 70.

⁶⁴ Nguyễn Khải. *Anh Hùng Bĩ Vận* (The Unlucky Hero) in *Tuyển Tập Nguyễn Khải* (The Collection of Nguyễn Khải's works). Vol. 3. Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1996. Pp. 205-206.

activities are affected as Nguyễn Khải mentioned in the excerpt shown above. Due to the failure of the Socialist economic model, the development of the market economy and the change of social values, the old writer becomes disenchanted and begins to think about the peasants he had associated during the revolutionary period. He discovers the truth that he does not know better than the masses. In fact, peasants know perfectly well about the reality of the countryside development. Meanwhile, Nguyễn Khải begins to realise that perhaps the view of the small-landholder, Tuy Kiển, about the co-operative system is right and his behaviour may not be that disdainful after all. In this case, the intellectual writer Nguyễn Khải can no longer place himself above the peasants. Therefore, the reconstruction of peasants in Nguyễn Khải's post-war short stories cannot be seen only as a calculated move, but rather as an expression of Nguyễn Khải's disillusionment with post-war society and its orientation-towards-a-market economy and industrial development. It is the society in which peasants may no longer be needed, just as revolutionary writers are no longer necessary.

Why?

The complexity of growing industrialisation in post-war Vietnam makes many individuals feel even more frustrated about social inequality. In wartime, the role of peasants was to fight for national sovereignty, whereas the economic recovery and cultural development in the Renovation period relies more on the contribution of the middle-class and intellectuals. The focus is turned to the city while the countryside, once a place where the revolution was carried out, is now neglected. Thus, some peasants feel betrayed by this shift of interest from the countryside to the city. Their frustration and dissatisfaction towards the changes in the socio-political development of the post-war Vietnam is reflected in the short story Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện (The Moralistic Murder) [1995], by Lại Văn Long. The story was awarded a literary prize by *Literature and the Art* journal (Văn Nghệ) in 1991.

The story began in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh city) after the South was defeated and under control of the Communists in 1975. A colonel, who fought in the North during the war, returns to the South and is reunited with his wife and son. Now the war is over, the Communist government begins expropriating the land and property of those who are accused of being landlords and collaborating with foreigners. The colonel and his family are given a house whose original owner is categorised as a landlord and has to leave the country. The colonel and his family are happy and believe that their

deprivation will come to an end, and that they will be able to live happily in the new regime. Later, the son becomes an exported labourer in the former Soviet Union where he hopes to make a fortune. However, things do not go according to plan.

After the Renovation policy and market economy are announced, the landlord returns from his exile in France. Now, he is no longer regarded as a traitor, but as a foreign investor who generously grants money to restore the mausoleum for war heroes. Soon afterwards, he also manages to develop a good relationship with high-ranking political leaders. Therefore, the landlord's request to get his house back is immediately approved. The colonel and his wife are allowed to stay in the house as servants. Their main duty is to look after the horses for the landlord, the same job that three generations of his ancestors, who were landless peasants, had done before for the ancestors of this landlord. The colonel's son returns from working abroad with nothing, due to the economic collapse in Eastern Europe, and also has to work for the landlord. Humiliated and frustrated by social injustice and the way history betrays the peasants, the son shoots the family of the landlord, and even takes his frustration out on the portrait of the landlord's ancestors hanging on the wall. When investigated by the police, the son shows no regret for what he did. He believes it is the right thing to do, and probably the only thing that he, the heir of the landless peasants, can do to restore the dignity of his class. As he says:

Only moralistic people can point the gun at oppression! I don't want 'the son of a king to be a king'⁶⁵ My father tried to liquidate the oppression by fighting enemies and serving the country for thirty years. I tried to end it in my own way. To liberate oneself from a poor and miserable life is a kind of morality, at least for me. My children, if I have any, will not be hired to cut grass and look after horses for the landlord like three generations of their ancestors.⁶⁶

The story shows that the peasants are outraged and feel that they are deceived by the ideals and promises of the revolution. The twist at the end also mirrors the

⁶⁵ From the folksong:

The son of a king would be a king,
The son of a temple watchman would sweep leaves.
When the peasants' uprising explodes,
The king's son will be in disgrace and lives in a temple

⁶⁶ Lại Văn Long. *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (The Moralistic Murder) in *Ánh Trăng: Tập Truyện Ngắn Được Giải* (Moonlight: A Collection of Awarded Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1995. P. 18.

disillusionment of the peasants towards the regime. At first, the peasants believed in the egalitarian opportunities promised by the new government. The victory of the Communists brought them hope, but then they became disillusioned after facing the post-war reality. Still, peasants have to endure hardship and exploitation. In the story, the anger and disappointment turns the son into a criminal, but at the same time he is also a victim. The story also reflects the frustration of the peasants and their struggle for equality and justice in the post-war society when Vietnam began to desert its old form of peasant politics and concentration on the countryside and moved towards industrial development and market economy.

Lại Văn Long is successful in combining the folksong with the contemporary situations of the peasants. Folksong interlinks the past and the present of the peasants' destiny and underlines the continuity of the antagonism of the peasants towards social injustice and equal opportunity. The theme of *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (The Moralistic Murder) is simple, but the story conveys a clear and strong message. Moreover, the storyline is very interesting because it is quick and full of surprising and unexpected events. According to the writer, Ma Văn Kháng, the content of the story is extreme and violent, but the narration that gradually reveals the growing anger and tension of the characters helps convince readers that the decision of the son of the colonel is justified.⁶⁷

It is seen in the post-1975 period that there is an attempt to replace the class conflict with a humanistic view. In the post-1975 literature, many writers try not to view peasants from a class perspective. They insist that the purpose of literature is to explore the destiny of human beings and individual plights regardless of the social class he or she belongs to. For instance, the writer Võ Văn Trục supports this view. As he argues in his well-known memoir, *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days) [1993]:

Human being is a high-ranking animal. When this superior kind of animal reveals its true nature, its bad side, such as cruelty and violence, is also exposed. Is the evolution of mankind is the history of class struggle? Or it is

⁶⁷ Quoted in *Ánh Trăng: Tập Truyện Ngắn Được Giải* (Moonlight: A Collection of Awarded Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1995. P. 171.

actually just the struggle between the good and bad inside each human being?⁶⁸

However, Lại Văn Long's short story shows that the endeavour to remove class conflict from literary works is unrealistic. It is unarguable that the wartime idea that class determines everything is too extreme, but the conflict between social classes actually exists. The class struggle remains in Vietnamese society and it is an important element to explain the relationship of people within society. Here, in *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (The Moralistic Murder), the action of the main character is class-bounded. Whether or not the history of mankind is the history of class struggle, the development of Vietnamese peasants' history is related to their struggle against the exploitation from other social classes.

Comparing *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (The Moralistic Murder) with Nam Cao's short story *Chí Phèo*, it can be seen that the authors of both stories use violence to resolve the frustration of the main characters. *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (The Moralistic Murder) was written over forty years after *Chí Phèo* was published, but it echoes the same frustration endured by landless peasants. Both stories reveal how peasants are oppressed and driven into impasse. *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (The Moralistic Murder) highlights the fact that peasants still have to struggle for social justice and use violence to emancipate themselves from deprivation. In the feudal-colonial period of the early twentieth century, *Chí Phèo* is striking against the landowning class. The struggle of the peasantry continues, as shown in the short story *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (The Moralistic Murder), in the post-war society, but this time their opponents are the middle-class rising with the growth of industry and economic transformation.

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To sum up, peasants are portrayed from diverse perspectives in post-1975 literature. They are not merely treated as the object of political debates, but are depicted as individual human beings with the complexity of good and bad qualities. The various portrayals of peasants are the outcome of the development of Vietnamese literature in the post-1975 society and a more liberal atmosphere of expression. Class struggle and

⁶⁸ Võ Văn Trục. *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days). Hanoi: NXB Lao Động, 1993. P. 169.

collective responsibility are still the main concerns in post-war short stories and novels, despite attempts to highlight individualistic and humanistic ideas. Through the stories about peasants and the countryside, it is clear that literature tried to disengage itself from the political arena as writers endeavour to depict a realistic picture of peasants and the countryside rather than respond to government policy as they did in the wartime. This change in the literary-political relationship enabled writers to explore new aspects of peasants' life and the various facets of the countryside, as the following chapters will try to show.

Chapter 3: Peasant Women

This chapter studies how peasant women are represented in Vietnamese literature. It will focus on how the questions of class and gender are entangled and discussed in Vietnamese literary works, particularly those written in the post-1975 period. The study is divided into three main parts. It will start with the emergence of peasant women in Vietnamese literature, then move forward to the construction of peasant women in wartime literature (1945-1975) and finally discuss the representation of peasant women in post-1975 literature, which is our main focus here.

3.1. The Emergence of Peasant Women in Vietnamese Literature

Traditionally, Vietnamese women have been controlled by the Confucian concepts of three submissions and four virtues. The three submissions divide a woman's life into three stages: when she is young, she has to obey her father; when she is married, she has to depend on her husband; and if her husband dies, she will have to listen to her eldest son. The four virtues include, labour-which constitutes skills like cooking, sewing and embroidery-physical appearance, appropriate speech and proper behaviour. However, it is argued that these Confucian doctrines were strictly applied only to upper-class women whereas women from lower classes, especially peasant women, suffered, to a lesser degree, from these Confucian influences. X

For example, Arlene Eisen Bergman makes an observation in her study on Vietnamese women that, '*Peasant women were by no means simply sorrowful victims of feudal patriarchy. Their songs expressed their anger and also gave strength to their resistance.*'¹ Trần Quốc Vượng also states in his book *Truyền Thống Phụ Nữ Việt Nam* (The Tradition of Vietnamese Women) that the peasant family was based on the harmony between husband and wife. He then supports his argument with this proverb; *thuận vợ thuận chồng tát biển Đông cũng cạn* (the harmony between husband and wife can dry the Eastern Sea).² It is also generally assumed that working in the rice fields and sometimes earning extra money from being small traders in markets

¹ Bergman, Arlene Eisen. *Women of Vietnam*. Second edition. San Francisco: People Press, 1975. P. 35.

² Trần Quốc Vượng. *Truyền Thống Phụ Nữ Việt Nam* (The Tradition of Vietnamese Women). Hanoi: NXB Phụ Nữ, 1972. P. 12.

allowed a peasant woman more freedom both inside her household and in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, a different view is proposed by the historian David Marr, who points out that although women in peasant families might not have to endure Confucian norms as much as did upper and middle class women, they were not necessarily better off. Young daughters from peasant families were sold as servants, concubines or prostitutes because of family poverty. There were also cases of tenants' wives or daughters being harassed or raped by landowners or mandarins.³ Moreover, in a peasant family, the main labour in the rice fields was normally undertaken by women. In spite of the fact that women played a vital role in the family's livelihood, their status both in the family and in society was still lower than that of men. The position of a woman in the traditional Vietnamese village very much depended on the status of her husband, as Jamieson describes:

The village status hierarchy was formally restricted to men only. Strictly speaking, women were not even members of the village. A woman's status level, in the sense of the way people treated her, depended upon her age, her reputation and her background. But basically, a woman took her husband's status. Women were, in fact, commonly addressed and referred to by their husband's status, title, or role.⁴

According to Marr, it was not until the 1920s that the debates on women's rights apparently began in Vietnam. A number of magazines and journals during this period, such as *Nam Phong* (Southern Ethos), were dedicated to the issue of women's rights. However, the focus of these magazines was mainly restricted to the interests of upper-class women.⁵ Also, it can be observed that the emphasis on women's issues in this period reflected the decline of Confucianism and the increasing influence of western ideas of egalitarianism and individualism. In literature, the individual pursuit of happiness is contrasted with Confucian doctrine, which emphasises the duty of a person towards his or her family and society. Arranged marriage is strongly opposed

³ Marr, David G. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. P. 197.

⁴ Jamieson, Neil L., 'The Traditional Village in Vietnam' in *The Vietnam Forum*, no.7. New Haven: Yale Southeast Asian Studies, 1986. P.100.

⁵ Marr, David. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. P. 202.

whereas freedom in love and marriage is promoted. The novel *Tố Tâm* [1925] by Hoàng Ngọc Phách and the works by Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliant literary group) published between 1933-1936, such as the novel *Đoạn Tuyệt* (Breaking the Tie) [1935] by Nhất Linh, portray middle and upper-class women who were torn apart by love and filial piety.⁶ However, the bourgeois movement to modernise Vietnam and the demand for the individual pursuit of happiness against Confucian ethics did not give much attention to peasant women. Women from the lower classes, such as peasants and workers, are almost absent from the works by urban-based writers.

It was the Indochinese Communist Party that eagerly put problems of lower-class women to the fore during the 1930s. It was clearly stated in the report from the plenary session of the Party held in October, 1930 that,

The party must free women from bourgeois ideas and eliminate the illusion of equality between the sexes expanded in bourgeois theories. At the same time, it must enable women to participate in the revolutionary struggles of the workers and peasants. This is an important task. For if women do not take part in these struggles, they can never emancipate themselves. So, it is necessary to fight the feudalists or religious customs and superstitions in their way, give women workers and peasants inventive political education, arouse their class consciousness and enable them to join the organisations of the working class. Political work must be carried out not only in towns but also in the countryside, among the poor peasants and all working women...To rally the women of all social strata, women's organisation should unite them in the struggle for their own rights and for their complete emancipation. These organisations shall enrol working women, workers' wives, women small traders, and all those who cannot join the workers' and peasants' organisations.⁷ (sic.)

The influence of Marxist ideology on the emancipation of women is shown in the articles by Phan Khôi and Nguyễn Thị Chinh published in the women's magazine *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* number 160 (21-07-1932) and number 162 (04-08-1932) respectively.

⁶ For further discussion on these works, see chapter 3 in Jamieson, Neil L. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

⁷ Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet. *Women in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978. Pp. 116-117.

Phan Khôi comments that the only way to emancipate women is to change people's *nhân sanh quan* (way of thinking). Nguyễn Thị Chinh argues that women's liberation is related to *luật tiến hoá của lịch sử* (historical development) and *nền móng kinh tế* (economic foundation). Therefore, to liberate women it is necessary not only to change their way of thinking, but also to reduce their working hours and increase their wages. By doing so, there would be a consciousness of women's rights among working-class women who, unlike women from the middle-class, were still not aware of the ongoing debate.⁸ However, it was not until the mid-1930s that working-class and peasant women had a chance to participate in the women's movement. Under the liberal policies of the Popular Front government in France (1936-1938), the Indochinese Communist Party launched a programme called '*chị em bình dân*' (common sisters). Its main issue was to demand equal pay and eight weeks' payment for maternity leave. The programme focused on the masses of female workers and peasants.

In fact, the belief that the emancipation of women could be accomplished by the introduction of large-scale industry, reflected in Nguyễn Thị Chinh's article, is ideologically inherited from Engels' work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* [1884]. This book played an important role in making policies and forming ideologies on gender and family in Communist states, Vietnam included.⁹ In his well-known work, Engels explains that the subordination of women is related to material inequality and the ownership of private property. He argues further that the abolition of the family-based economy, and the provision of social services covering domestic chores and childcare would free women from gender inequality. This was because the large-scale industry system would break down the kinship and patriarchal family system, which ideologically has had a significant influence on men and women alike. As he postulates:

⁸ These two articles were later printed in Thanh Lăng (ed.). *13 Năm Tranh Luận Văn Học (1932-1945)* (13 Years of Literary Debate). Volume 3. Ho Chi Minh city: NXB Văn Học, 1995. 134-145.

⁹ In his writings on the woman's issue, Hồ Chí Minh made several references to Engels' ideas, and explicitly revealed his admiration to this Marxist philosopher. For example, see Hồ Chí Minh. *Hồ Chủ tịch với Vấn Đề Phụ Nữ* (President Hồ Chí Minh and The Woman Question). Hanoi: NXB Phụ Nữ, 1960. In fact, the emancipation of women, especially those from lower classes, received considerable attention from Communist leaders elsewhere as well as in Vietnam. For instance, in the book, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Lenin describes how peasant women and working-class women were exploited. But he stated that the large-scale industry and working in factories would help emancipate women from the patriarchal system. In China, Mao-Tse-Tung regarded women as the most oppressed people in society, as he wrote in '*Report on an Investigation into the Peasant Movement of Hunan, 1927*'.

The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time. And only now has that become possible through modern large-scale industry, which does not merely permit the employment of female labour over a wide range, but positively demand it, while it also tends toward ending private domestic labour by changing it more and more into a public industry.¹⁰

Engels' analysis of gender inequality from the standpoint of historical materialism provides the insight that the oppression of women is complex. It also helps us to understand how historical, political, social and economic conditions determine the unequal relationship between men and women, who are the agents of production and reproduction. As Engels points out, the oppression of women is also related to the structures of the mode of production and social class, which are also main factors in the oppression of women. Thus, the oppression of women should not simply be ascribed to male chauvinism. In the same way, it is not always true that all women are sisters. In Vietnamese feudal society, poor peasants, men and women alike, were equally oppressed by both male and female members of the landowning class.

Engels' explanation of the relation between gender inequality and the ownership of private property was well received in Vietnam. For example, Vũ Ngọc Phan, a scholar and an expert in Vietnamese folk literature, explains that peasant women traditionally had to listen to their fathers, husbands, male siblings or even their sons because women had no right to the ownership of property. Only men were entitled to inherit the family's land and property.¹¹ The following folksong can support Vũ Ngọc Phan's argument and illustrate how an older unmarried peasant girl feels about the issue of inheritance as the years pass:

W Hông Đức - Code

The star of the third watch is above my head (11 pm-1am)- old unmarried girl
Yet, I'm still staying at home to enrich my father
When my father gets rich, he does not divide his wealth evenly

¹⁰Engels, Frederick. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. London: Lawrence&Wishart, 1972. P. 221.

¹¹ Vũ Ngọc Phan, 'Những Tiếng Phán Kháng của Phụ Nữ Nông Thôn trong Dân Ca Việt Nam' (Rural Women's Voice of Resistance in Folk Songs) in *Tập Sản Nghiên Cứu Văn Sử Địa*, no. 6, 1955. P. 41.

And as a girl what share do you think I get? ¹²

Thus, the rise in the status of peasant women and the emergence of peasant women in literature were due to the influence of Marxist ideology and Communist movements in the 1930s. By the late 1930s, urban-based middle-class writers began to feel that their own class was corrupt, and that their lives were trivial and meaningless. They turned to the countryside and peasants for a place to escape from turmoil in the corrupted city. The countryside was considered as a source of morality. Therefore, it is not surprising that the members of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (The Self-Reliant Literary group) criticised the manners and attitudes of bourgeois women and romanticised peasant women for their self-sacrifice and diligence. For example, in the short story *Hai Vẽ Đẹp* (Two Beauties) [1936], Nhất Linh shows that city girls, Dung, Lan and Tuyết, were living a dissipated life. Their existence was pointless. They might look beautiful, but their beauty came from their make-up and clothes. Compared to the simple but genuine beauty of the rural women, the beauty of urban women was fake and superficial.

At the same time, the Realist and revolutionary literature became dominant in Vietnamese literary circles and public debates. Realist and revolutionary writers attacked the colonial regime for its oppressive policies towards local people, and criticised the feudal system as backward and outdated. A new type of literature turned its hope for the future to peasants with the expectation that the salvation of the nation would be accomplished by the masses. However, when writing about peasants, writers normally referred to male peasants whereas peasant women played only a minor role and were normally included in the stories as the wives, daughters or lovers of the male protagonists. In the literary works written during the period of 1930-1945, it is common for peasant women to be described as stupid and credulous, and they were often depicted as the victims of exploitation and rape by feudal landlords or men from the city, such as the character Mịch in *Giông Tố* (The Storm) by Vũ Trọng Phụng, and Bính in *Bí Vỡ* (The Pickpocket) by Nguyễn Hồng, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Some male writers were unable to avoid the influence of Confucian bias against women. It is not difficult to find traces of gender-biased ideology influenced by the

¹² Ngo Vinh Long. *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution: The French Colonial Period*. Vietnamese Resource centre: Massachusetts, 1974. P. 8.

Confucian concept of patriarchy in their works. For instance, the well-known writer Nguyễn Công Hoan might have to accept that peasants were a main force for the revolution, but he could not wholeheartedly admire them because of their backwardness and unrefined manners. In his works, male peasants are described as ignorant and superstitious, but peasant women are depicted as being even worse. For example, in his well-known novel, *Bước Đường Cùn* (Impasse) [1939], the wife of Pha, the protagonist, is portrayed as stupid and gullible, and the author did not bother giving her a name. She did not believe that having an injection could protect her from epidemic diseases. As the author clearly pointed out, her death is due to her ignorance and superstition.¹³

The oppression of peasant women became a topic that received considerable attention from petty-bourgeois and middle-class male writers in the late 1930s, such as in the novel *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light is Out) by Ngô Tất Tố.¹⁴ However, their ultimate goal was, in fact, to condemn the corruption of local officials and criticise the policies of the colonial government, such as the tax system. The historian, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, observes that writing by male writers about the oppression of women during the 1920s-1930s was a means of expressing their frustration about the political situation in colonial society and criticism against colonial administration. As she explains:

Gender acted as a coded language of debating a whole range of issues without overstepping the limits imposed on public discourse by colonial censorship. The French rhetoric of empire which represented France as the mother country, the Governor-General as a father figure, and the colonial people as children at various stages of immaturity met its match in the Vietnamese literary practice at commenting on human condition through the device of female characters.¹⁵

¹³ Gender bias can be observed through Nguyễn Công Hoan's works. He was strongly against the idea that women should be free from familial piety and have the right to choose their own partner. For example, in his novel *Cô Giáo Minh* (Miss Minh, the School Teacher) [1936], which was written to respond to the novel *Đoạn Tuyệt* (Breaking the Tie) by Nhất Linh, Nguyễn Công Hoan conservatively pointed out that a women should try to persevere and learn how to be a good wife and daughter-in-law instead of following the Western model and demanding freedom. The discussion of this novel can be found in Jamieson, Neil L. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Pp. 144-154.

¹⁴ For the discussion of this novel, see Chapter 1.

¹⁵ Hue-Tam Ho Tai. *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1992. P. 90.

In 1941, the Women's Association for National Salvation was founded. It aimed to unite Vietnamese women from all classes in order to fight against the Japanese and the French troops. In 1946 there was the foundation of the Vietnam Women's Union, which is still active to the present day. These women's organisations share two main purposes: to support the revolution and to defend women's rights.¹⁶ Therefore, the movement for gender equality and the struggle for national independence are closely linked. The liberation of women was largely a political end. According to Marr, the policy of gender equality and the contribution of women were important weapons employed by the Party in the post-1945 period.¹⁷ Literature, which is also regarded as a political weapon, unavoidably took part in these women's movement campaigns, as will be discussed in the following section.

3.2. Peasant Women in Wartime Literature

In the thirty years of wartime literature (1945-1975), the portrayal of peasant women altered dramatically from the previous period; namely from being victims of economic oppression in a colonial society women became instead the agents of production and political activities. This change in the representation of peasant women was due to the Communist government's determination to pacify the South and to establish agricultural collectivisation, as a part of the process of Socialist development. As will be shown in the following paragraphs, peasant women were often portrayed as warriors and labourers in collective farms.

3.2.1. Peasant Women as Guerrilla Fighters

The Communist government in the North, under the policy of liberating the South and unifying the whole of Vietnam, sent troops and revolutionaries to propagate Communist ideology in the Southern areas, and not only men but also a number of women were recruited to join the movement, notably the famous long-hair army.¹⁸ It is estimated that there were 840,000 women guerrillas in North Vietnam in 1952, and

¹⁶ Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet. *Women in Vietnam*. Pp. 324-325.

¹⁷ Marr, David. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. P. 192.

¹⁸ For more detail, see Taylor, Sandra C. *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Hồ Chí Minh and the Revolution*. Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 1999.

140,000 female fighters in the South in 1950.¹⁹ Most of them came from peasant families.

The female fighters are vividly portrayed in a number of novels, short stories and reportages, notably in the works by the revolutionary writer Nguyễn Thi. He worked as a revolutionary cadre in the Southern region, and worked closely with peasant women in this area. Many of his characters are based on his experiences and encounters with peasant women in the South, especially in the areas occupied by foreign troops. His novels and short stories repeatedly show how patriotism and responsibility to the nation can turn an ordinary peasant girl into an effective guerrilla fighter.

For example, the storylines of his well-known short stories; *Người Mẹ Cầm Súng* (Armed Mother) [1965]²⁰ and *Mẹ Vắng Nhà* (Mother Is Not Home) [1966] are based on the real story of a patriotic Vietnamese peasant woman, Nguyễn Thị Út. The writer praised Nguyễn Thị Út for being brave and patriotic. As emphasised in both short stories, Nguyễn Thị Út loved her husband and children no less than did other women, but still she regarded the national cause as the first priority. She joined the guerrillas and fought energetically, even when she was pregnant.

Through the character, Nguyễn Thị Út, the author draws a triangular connection between class struggle, women's liberation and national independence. Nguyễn Thị Út is born in a poor peasant family and is, at the age of eight, sold to a landowning peasant, Hàm Giỏi. She has to work as a servant and is badly treated. One day, due to hunger she steals a piece of meat. The landlady beats her brutally and asks her to return the meat. As she has already swallowed the meat, the cruel woman makes Nguyễn Thị Út vomit. Nguyễn Thị Út is freed when the liberation forces came to the village. Then, Nguyễn Thị Út joins the guerrillas. As a young girl, she begins to realise that women are prone to sexual harassment by the soldiers of the foreign troops and the Southern regime. Nguyễn Thị Út soon understands that fighting for

¹⁹Mai Thi Tu, 'The Vietnamese Woman Yesterday and Today' in Michael Klein (ed.). *The Vietnam era: Media and Popular Culture in the US and Vietnam*. London and Massachusetts: Pluto Press, 1990. P. 193.

²⁰ It was awarded the *Nguyễn Đình Chiểu Literary Prize* for the literary works written between 1960-1965.

national freedom is necessary because this would guarantee that she would not have to tolerate oppression from the landowners and harassment from enemies.

According to Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn, a literary critic, the characterisation of Nguyễn Thị Út exemplifies the qualities of Vietnamese women exalted by Hồ Chí Minh. During the war against the American troops, Hồ Chí Minh used four words to describe the characteristics of Vietnamese women: *anh hùng* (heroic), *bất khuất* (indomitable), *trung hậu* (faithful), and *đảm đang* (responsible).²¹ Whether or not Nguyễn Thị was aware of Hồ Chí Minh's description of the ideal woman and should be considered as a genuine writer or merely as war propagandist, he contributed a great deal in conveying the sacrifice and heroism of peasant women.

3.2.2. Peasant Women as Agricultural Labourers

After the land reform programme and agricultural collectivisation were introduced in North Vietnam in the 1950s, novelists and short story writers emphasised the role of peasant women in agricultural production. It is evident that the collective farms had to rely on women's labour whilst almost all the men in the village were recruited to fight in the war. It is reckoned that, during the war, women made up 80-90 per cent of the members of the agricultural co-operatives.²² The importance of peasant women for the new agricultural system was clearly stressed by the Vietnamese leader Lê Duẩn:

Ours being mainly an agricultural economy, the main task of the drive for socialist transformation in the immediate future is to turn our backward agriculture into a co-operativized, and subsequently, mechanised and modern agriculture. Who are the labourers that directly carry out the socialist revolution in the countryside? They are the poor and middle peasants, half of whom are women. It may be said that our women peasants are shouldering a bigger workload than men. A great number of them have thus taken a direct part in the socialist revolution now unfolding in the countryside.²³

²¹ Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn. *Góp Mấy Đồng vào Văn Học* (The Contribution to Literature). Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1999. P. 246.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

²³ Lê Duẩn, 'We Must View the Women's Question from a Class Standpoint'. P.113.

Therefore, peasant women unsurprisingly became a main focus in literature. A number of short stories and novels, notably those written after the agricultural collectivisation was introduced into the countryside, stress that it was necessary for peasant women to take part in economic and political activities. Two short stories by Ngô Ngọc Bội, *Chị Cả Phây* (Madame Bright Skin) [1961] and *Chị Thản* (Madame Thản) [1970] are good examples of this literary trend.

Ngô Ngọc Bội wrote *Chị Cả Phây* (Madame Bright Skin) in order to awaken a social consciousness among peasant women. The original name of the protagonist is Thanh, but the villagers call her Chị Cả Phây because she has a beautiful complexion. She is described as a typical Vietnamese peasant woman: hard working, thrifty and conservative. Chị Cả Phây, a widow, never intends to remarry but a number of men are interested in her. She tries hard to stay unmarried and takes good care of her only son. However, the author does not consider her behaviour admirable. Instead, he indicates that she is ideologically influenced by Confucian ideas. According to the Confucian norms, a widow is not encouraged to remarry and is even regarded as a property of her late husband's family. Chị Cả Phây is also criticised for her attempt to arrange a marriage for her 11-year-old son. Through the viewpoint of Cự Hiệp, a respectable old man in the village, Chị Cả Phây does not need to worry about her son or prepare anything for his future because he is now a child of the collective. So, his future will be secure. For the author, Chị Cả Phây and other female peasants should change their ideas about the upbringing of children and try to be a part of the collective.

In depicting Chị Cả Phây, the author endeavoured to point out the conservative characteristics of Vietnamese peasant women whereas the character Chị Thản is to contrast with Chị Cả Phây and represent an ideal model for Vietnamese peasant women. Chị Thản represented the image of peasant woman that the government wanted to promote: namely, she understands the purpose of the revolution and how it is necessary for women to share revolutionary tasks. Unlike other women in the village who moan when their husbands leave to fight in the war, Chị Thản not only stays calm, but also helps remind other women that they have important tasks to do while their husbands are away, including increasing the production of the co-operative.

Ngô Ngọc Bội was not the only writer who underlined the conservative mentality of peasant women, especially in terms of love and marriage. A similar theme is also found in the novel, *Đi Bước Nữa* (Take Another Step) [1960], by Nguyễn Thế Phương. The author criticises the conservative notion that did not allow a widowed woman to remarry, but which required her to stay and work for the family of her late husband. The story reveals the difficult life of Hoan, a widow with two children. Her mother-in-law has sympathy for Hoan, but she does not want Hoan to do anything that would go against traditional practices. The narrator shows that one problem of achieving gender equality is that gender prejudices are deeply rooted in women's mentality. Towards the end of the novel, Nguyễn Thế Phương emphasises that it was Communist cadres and the co-operative system that brought happiness to peasant women and emancipated them from conservative ideas preventing them from 'đi bước nữa', or 'remarrying'.

The similarity between these two stories is not a coincidence. Both authors reflect the Communist government's attempt to improve the social status of women. After the Communists took control of the Northern part of the country, they introduced two main policies that were believed to be perfect solutions for the emancipation of women, especially those from the peasantry. The first policy was to change some legislative issues on marriage and the family, and the second was agricultural collectivisation. The law on marriage and family, passed in 1960, stated that polygamy was illegal. Hồ Chí Minh himself also paid attention to this issue. As he commented:

Failing to free women means failing to liberate half of humanity. Failing to free women means that the building of socialism is half completed...The law on marriage aims at freeing women, that is, liberating half of society. As women are emancipated, we must eradicate feudal and bourgeois ideology in men.²⁴

However, changing men's ideology, as Hồ Chí Minh suggested, was not simple, as reflected in the collection of short stories, *Bông Hoa Súng* (Water Lily) [1967] by the writer Vũ Thị Thường. She uses the water lily as a metaphor for the beauty of

²⁴ Quoted in Bergman, Arlene Eisen. *Women of Vietnam*. P. 215.

Vietnamese peasant women. At first glance, people may not consider the water lily to be beautiful, however, if they take time to look at it more carefully, they will see that this kind of flower is no less beautiful than others. Moreover, its beauty contains modesty and serenity. Similar to Ngô Ngọc Bội, Vũ Thị Thường served the national cause and responded to the government's policy on rural development in her writing. However, her works express a better understanding of women in the countryside. For instance, in the short story *Từ Mỗi Căn Nhà Như Thế* (From each House like that), published in the same collection, the theme is to call for women's support in taking charge in political and social tasks. The story argues that peasant women who did not join the revolution, or remained passive, not because they were conservative or selfish, but because they did not have enough confidence. The author suggests that peasant women need to be encouraged and assured that they could work and contribute to society as well as men.

As reflected in her short stories, Vũ Thị Thường often asserts that government programmes in the 1960s, such as *Ba đảm đang* or the 'Three Responsibilities'²⁵ and 'Three Ensures'²⁶ movements, were helping to improve the status of peasant women in village society. Owing to these movements, more women were being elected as leaders of local communities. However, a main problem as regards women taking control of local organisations was from the social attitudes towards women.²⁷ In general, people did not believe that women could be as good leaders as the men. For example, in the short story *Chúng Tôi...* (We...), the old man Gắng is pleased when his daughter gets elected as the chairman of a co-operative. But, at the same time, he is worried that, as a girl, she will be unable to manage the co-operative and gain respect from people in the village. Similarly, in the short story *Câu Chuyện Xảy Ra Không*

²⁵ It required women to take part in the production of collective farms and other activities while men went to the battlefield. Women were also expected to take charge of all family affairs, and support the fighting against foreign invaders. See more in Mai Thị Tu, and Le Thị Nham Tuyet. *Women in Vietnam*. P. 258.

²⁶ It included; ensure timely planting, ensure good techniques and ensure cultivation in accordance with the plan. See more in *Glorious Daughters of Vietnam*. 2 volumes. Hanoi: The Vietnam women's Union, 1975. P. 27.

²⁷ This problem was recognised by the Premier Phạm Văn Đông. Follow is the quotation from his speech in February 1967:

Though we are a socialist country, a heroic nation with an advanced and civilised ideology and political regime, we still have many shortcomings concerning women. These are the remnants of old, feudal and backward ideas. The struggle against these attitudes must occur in both the spheres of culture and ideology. How should we go about eliminating these vestiges? Uncle Ho said recently that in some places women and wives were still badly treated. This is not an isolated phenomenon, but a rather common one unfortunately.

From Phạm Văn Đông. *Some Cultural Problems* (speeches). Hanoi: Foreign languages Publishing House, 1981. P. 44.

Tránh Khỏi (Inevitable Conflict) [1966], Vũ Thị Thường shows us how a peasant woman is struggling to be accepted as a leader of a village community. Through the character Mũi, who is appointed as the chairperson of a cooperative, the author reveals that it is difficult for a woman to hold political office, not because of her lack of ability but because of the way she is perceived. For Mũi, it is even worse because her confidence is undermined by her own husband. He is proud of his wife, but is still concerned that she might not be capable of completing the task by herself and will need his assistance. At the end of the story, the author points out that a woman who wants to achieve public confidence and acceptance must also confront the patriarchal ideology which prevails in her own family. Like Mũi, in order to carry on a political task, she needs to be confident and to fight against old-fashioned ideas and biases, even from her own husband. As Vũ Thị Thường emphasises, it is important for gender prejudice to be solved first at the household level.

Another interesting story, which is based on a similar theme, is *Vợ chồng Chị Đội Trưởng* (The Unit Leader and Her Husband). People in the village and officials in central administration all agreed that Mrs. Vĩnh was qualified to be the leader of a production unit. The only reason they did not want her to take the position of leader was because she was a woman. They decided that, in theory, her husband should take the title of unit leader while in practice Mrs. Vĩnh would do the job for him. Owing to the 'Three Responsibilities' movement promoting the role of women in the village community, Mrs. Vĩnh was finally elected as the unit leader. The following conversation shows how women are discriminated by gender bias in village community:

A man, about 30 years old, suddenly asked:

'Why didn't we elect her as our unit leader since Mr. Bái resigned last time?'

One person answered:

'Probably because at that time she just gave birth to a baby...'

Another person argued:

'No, it was not because of giving birth, but I guess it's because she was sick.'

Mrs. Mân, who is well-known for being outspoken, could not stand these speculations any longer, and had to interrupt the conversation:

'It was not because she gave birth or was ill. It was only because in those days you men discriminated against us women. There was no difference among

cadres. You never wanted to vote for us. Just only now with the 'three responsibilities' programme, and also if you don't let women in, who will work in this production unit when men are going to join the army?' ²⁸

The decade of 1960s, the period of Socialist construction and establishment of collective farms, was generally celebrated by writers as the first time in Vietnamese history that women from lower classes, in particular from the peasantry, had been given a sense of pride and dignity. The writers highlighted the fact that peasant women had the right to join agricultural co-operatives and were given land and tools. The Communist system of 'work points' also allowed peasant women to earn points and to receive a share from the harvest according to how much work they did. This also enabled them to be a part of the community. They did not have to take their husbands' status or name as they had in previous periods. However, while responding to government policies on rural development and mass mobilisation, literature did not fail to raise an intriguing question as to whether or not agricultural collectivisation and government campaigns on women movements had brought about gender equality in the countryside. As discussed earlier, throughout this period writers argued that Vietnamese peasant women were still suffered from patriarchal concept, and that it was, in fact, never successfully abolished. ²⁹

Some have concluded that the women's movement in wartime Vietnam was geared not towards liberation, but to exploitation. For instance, Stephanie Fahey argues that the Vietnamese leaders regarded the woman question as part of the agenda for

²⁸ Vũ Thị Thường. *Vợ Chồng Chỉ Đội Trưởng* (The Leader Unit and Her Husband) in *Bông Hoa Súng: Tập Truyện Ngắn*. Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1967. P. 45.

²⁹ According to Mai Thi Tu, the policy of promoting women cadres did not fully achieve its goals. She notes that in 1960 1,150 women were elected to the management committees of co-operatives in Hải Dương province. But this number was only 11 per cent of the total membership, whereas the target was 30 per cent. See more in Mai Thi Tu, 'The Vietnamese Woman Yesterday and Today' P. 195.

Another example of sexual inequality in agricultural co-operatives is revealed in Tran Thi Van Anh's article, as follows:

In practice, however, cooperative heads assigned work according to their perceptions of workers' abilities. Thus, women were more likely to be assigned traditional women's work, such as transplanting, weeding, manuring, harvesting and animal-breeding. In general, women's work received fewer work points. One workday for transplanting earned ten points, and one workday for fertilising received eight. Men's work earned them more points: one workday for ploughing received twelve points and one workday for a carpenter earned fourteen.

For more information, see Tran Thi Van Anh, 'Women and Rural Land in Vietnam' in Tinker, Irene and Gale Summerfield (eds.). *Women's Right in House and Land: China, Laos and Vietnam*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999. P. 99.

national struggle and socialist society.³⁰ David Marr mentioned in his book that, 'it was often pointed that if all Vietnamese were oppressed to some degree, then Vietnamese women were the most oppressed of all.'³¹ A similar comment was made by another historian, Douglas Pike, who put it bluntly that 'The women were in truth the water buffalo of the Revolution.'³² Christine White shares the same view and asserts that '[T]he Leninist route to Women's emancipation by drawing women into productive labour seems a cruel joke, a formula for total exhaustion rather than for liberation.'³³ These comments are by no means overstatements. However, it is difficult to determine categorically whether or not the invention of a stereotype of peasant women in literature contributes to the process of this exploitation. Throughout the period between 1945-1975, literature was subordinated to the political struggle, and the reflection of peasant women in literary works was intended to highlight the importance of socialist construction and economic development in rural areas. The link between the images of peasant women in the literature and the political agenda of nation-state building is evident. Nevertheless, one can say that during the wartime period the contribution of peasant women and realisation of their problems were raised and discussed in literary works to an unprecedented degree. Vietnamese writers took part in the mobilisation of peasant women in the struggle and establishment of agricultural collectivisation, but their sympathy for the peasant women was somehow undeniably real.

3.3. Peasant Women in Post-1975 Literature

This part of the chapter will focus on the depiction of peasant women depicted in post-1975 literature, and will study the main factors underlining the changes and continuities in the representation of peasant women. An early remark is that the transformation of the socio-political context from wartime into peace had a significant effect on the change in the representation of peasant women in literature. It can be seen in the literary works discussed in the following paragraphs that there is an

³⁰ Fahey, Stephanie, 'Vietnam's Women in the Revolution Era' in Sen, Khrisha and Maila Stevens (eds.). *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. P. 225.

³¹ Marr, David G. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. P.191.

³² Pike, Douglas. *Viet Cong: The Organisation and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*. Massachusetts: The M.I.T Press, 1966. P. 178.

³³ Quoted in Pham Van Bich. *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta*. Surrey: Curzon, 1999. P. 64.

attempt to depoliticise the depiction of peasant women while the issues of gender bias, sensuality and femininity are more openly discussed.

3.3.1. The Idealisation of Peasant Women

The first section will discuss literary works by Nguyễn Minh Châu and his attempt to revive the traditional roles of peasant women as mother and wife. Nguyễn Minh Châu's images of peasant women reflect political expectation about the role of peasant women in post-war society. First, he tried to highlight the concept of women as the mothers of the nation, and secondly to support the traditional idea of women as dutiful wife.

A Heroic Mother

Throughout the development of wartime literature, women were encouraged to adopt the idea that they are the mothers of the whole nation and that their contribution was vital for the revolution. Nguyễn Minh Châu published the novel *Miền Cháy* (The Burned Region) in 1977, two years after the end of the war and the unification of the country. The central character of the story is Êm, a peasant woman in the central region. Her four husbands and seven sons were killed in the war. Êm is not the only Vietnamese woman who lost all her children during the war. The Communist government created the status of *mẹ anh hùng* or heroic mother in order to honour those mothers whose children were killed in the war against the Americans. Any woman who lost at least three children during the war was given a medal and was honoured as a heroic mother. Those who had fewer children but lost them all were also entitled to receive this honour.³⁴

The novel started with end of the war when soldiers returning to their home villages. Hiên, a friend of Êm's youngest son, Nghĩa, asked Êm to look after Sinh, a little boy from Saigon. Êm loved the boy as if he were her own son and took good care of him. She discovered later that the boy was in fact the son of a colonel of the South Vietnam regime who killed her youngest son during the attack on Saigon. The novel ends with the confrontation of Êm and the colonel, and Êm successfully overcomes the anger

³⁴ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting' in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. 179-180.

and hatred in herself, and returns the boy to his father. This is a big challenge to the Vietnamese in the post-war period when people in the North and the South had to co-exist again after a long period of fighting. A question for those women who lost their husbands and children during the conflict was how would they deal with the post-war situation? If, during wartime, a peasant woman heroically carried a gun and fought alongside men as portrayed in *Người Mẹ Cầm Súng* (An Armed Mother) by Nguyễn Thi, then in the post-war period should she try to vanquish her antagonism and learn to forgive like Êm? Should she also love other Vietnamese boys and girls as her own children? Once again, peasant women were asked to be selfless. If, during the war, they had been required to give all they had for the cause of the nation, then afterwards they were asked to forget what they had sacrificed.

A Dutiful Wife

In the short story, *Cỏ Lau* (Lau Grass) [1989], Nguyễn Minh Châu tells about the loyalty of a peasant woman. The story is set in a village in the central region. Just a few days after their marriage, Lực has to leave his wife, Thai, for the northern part of the country in order to join the revolutionary army. When a man is found dead, people say that it is the corpse of Lực. Thai believes Lực has been killed and then marries Quảng, a photographer, and moves to live in his town. Although she then has four children with her new husband, she still takes a good care of Lực's old father and worships the grave and image of her former husband. When she finds out that Lực is still alive, she decides to go back to him. Nguyễn Minh Châu examines the character Thai through the conversations between Lực and Quảng:

Quảng: If you and Thai had a child before you left to the fight in the North, she would have been satisfied. Having a child would help alleviate the pain of a woman who lost her husband in the war. I have a child with my ex-wife. It is a girl. She is very spoiled. She comes to live with me sometimes. Thai loves my daughter like her own child, maybe even more than our children. That makes Thai hate me (as she thinks that I do not care about my daughter). The more she loves my daughter, the more Thai hates me.

Lực: You are a good husband. How can Thai hate you?

Quảng: She hates me. The more I try to please her, the more I am hated by her. Sometimes, it seems to me that she even wants to take revenge on me and

thinks that I am the cause of your death. I guess that Thai, my wife, is the kind of women who can love only one man. She will love you all the rest of her life. Women nowadays are not like her. Nowadays, women in the South or the North are the same. When they hear that their husbands have been killed in the war, they may cry, and throw themselves on the ground because of sorrow, but two or three days later they will feel better and remarry and live happily with new husbands. Actually that is a good thing. My wife is a conservative woman, a woman who keeps waiting for her husband until she turns into stone.³⁵

The concept of women's loyalty in the above excerpt is influenced by a Vietnamese folk story. In a country with a long history of war, Vietnamese men have continually marched to war while their mothers, wives or girlfriends wait for them faithfully and patiently. In this story, the author makes an allusion to *Núi Đợi* or Waiting Mountain. Its exact location is not mentioned, but it is somewhere in the central region. In this area, there are many rocks that resemble a woman holding a child. A folk tale explains that these women came to the *Núi Đợi* in order to wait for their husbands who had gone to war. They had waited there so long that they turned into stones, which symbolise their long-suffering patience.³⁶ The theme of faithfulness is also found in a folk song:

Even if we have to climb mountains, I will follow you.
Together we shall go our way, leaning on each other,
To feed ourselves, we shall pick wild fruits.³⁷

It is evident that the female peasants in Nguyễn Minh Châu's stories are characterised as gentle, but tough and hard working. They are always ready to sacrifice everything for the nation and their loved ones, as well as for people around them. This can possibly be explained by the fact that Nguyễn Minh Châu modelled these characters

³⁵ Nguyễn Minh Châu *Cỏ Lau* (Lau Grass) in *Tuyển Tập Truyện Ngắn* (The Collection of Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1999. Pp. 505-506.

³⁶ This theme is also reflected in a better-known legend of the statue of Tô Thị in Lạng Sơn province, a mountainous area in the North of Vietnam. It is a 200 metre-high rock with the silhouette of a woman with a child in her arms. It is said that this is Tô Thị, waiting for her husband, who was sent to fight against enemies at the Northern border, and turned into stone. Hữu Ngọc. *Sketches for a Portrait of Vietnamese Culture*. Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 1998. Pp. 49-50.

³⁷ Mai Thi Tu, 'Vietnamese Women Yesterday and Today', p. 189.

after his mother who was also a peasant.³⁸ There is no doubt that Nguyễn Minh Châu has a great sympathy for the peasantry, but the characterisation of peasant women in his work is rather disappointing because it is entirely based on male experiences, their expectation of women and their vision of the world, rather than being an attempt to respond to the problems of peasant women.

3.3.2. *The Equilibrium between Family and Political Struggle*

During wartime, some peasant women were selected to attend short training programmes and technical education, and were appointed to run the co-operatives. Things began to change when the war was over and the troops were demobilised. Men returned to the village, and they felt uneasy that women occupied high-status positions in local administration. A husband would not be very happy that he was an ordinary member of the agricultural co-operative while his wife held a leading position. Men felt it might have been acceptable for women to participate in political activities during the war, but that afterwards they should be expected to concentrate more on the home and family. In the late 1970s, a number of women who had moved into leading positions in the rural areas came into conflict with their husbands.³⁹

A remarkable novel that reflects the women's struggle to maintain the equilibrium between family happiness and political activity is *Cù Lao Tràm* (The Tràm Island) [1985] by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn. It tells the story of Năm Trà, who, during wartime, is chosen to receive ideological and professional training, and later becomes a high-ranking committee member of the co-operative. Although, she plays an important role in economic and political decision-making for the co-operative, her status is questioned by male colleagues who have just returned from the front. As the author suggests, the decline of the co-operative system in the early 1980s was partly due to male patriarchal ideas. Male co-operative members are reluctant to listen to or follow Năm Trà's suggestions even though they are less qualified than Năm Trà. Most of them did not have the proper training she had. Also, they need to adapt themselves into the post-war society after spending several years in the battlefields. Năm Trà also

³⁸ Nguyễn Minh Châu, 'Thư Gửi Thế Giới Cảm xúc Hồn Nhiên' (A Letter to Innocent World) in Nguyễn Kim Huy (ed.), *Gửi Thế Giới Cảm Xúc Hồn Nhiên* (Sending to Innocent World). Đà Nẵng: NXB Đà Nẵng, 1995, P. 42.

³⁹ White, Christine Pelzer, 'State, Culture and Gender: Continuity and Change in Women's Position in Rural Vietnam' in Afshar, Haleh (ed.), *Women, State, and Ideology: Studies from Africa and Asia*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1987. Pp.226-234.

faces a family problem. Her husband, who returns from the front, finds it difficult to adjust to civilian life. He does not have any qualifications or technical knowledge to start a new career, but he does not want to remain in the co-operative either. He feels humiliated that he is an ordinary co-operative member while Năm Trà has a leading position. Finally, he leaves for the city, and later moves in with another woman.

However, the author decided not to end the novel with the couple divorcing. As noted in the epilogue, the narrator ironically says that he would like Năm Trà to divorce her husband because he would then be praised for having supported the cause of women's liberation. But the narrator himself does not believe that divorce can solve the problem and bring true happiness to the woman. He also hints that Năm Trà's husband would realise his mistake and go back to his family. At the end, he concludes that Năm Trà is happy with her life and her unstable marriage.

Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn's novel gives an insightful discussion of the ongoing problems of the co-operative administration and the role of women in rural development. The author knows the problems of rural women, and exposes the difficulties of how they have to strike a balance between the happiness of their family and their political duties. However, he does not have a genuine interest in women's liberation nor does he offer solutions to these problems. On the other hand, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn chooses to emphasise the feminine qualities of women, such as self-sacrifice, humility and patience rather than to criticise the patriarchal ideas of men. In order to obtain happiness, women, like Năm Trà, should not be demanding, but compromising, both at the workplace and in the family.

3.3.3. *The Critique of Patriarchy, Kinship and the Family System*

What is often reflected in the post-war literary texts is the fact that peasant women in Vietnam are still burdened by social and gender prejudices arising from the Confucian concept of patriarchy. Post-war writers, such as Lê Lựu, Nguyễn Khắc Trường and Dương Hương, use their writings to expose the patriarchal, kinship and family system that is still practised in the rural areas of Vietnam. Through the period of Socialist development, patriarchy might be challenged, reformed or refined, but it is obviously never abolished. For example, in her research on women in Vietnam, Kathleen Barry explains that the failure of the government policy to emancipate women in Vietnam

was caused by the fact that it over-simplified the problem. The Vietnamese Communists believed that gender inequality could be solved if men changed their attitudes. However, the problem is never properly resolved and it still occurs in the post-war society mainly because '*men, like other privileged groups, do not give up power in the family or anywhere else because they are expected to change their attitudes.*'⁴⁰

In her interesting work *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*, Judith Stacey argues that Socialism cannot emancipate women. In fact, Socialism is rather compatible with a patriarchal gender-biased system. This is because a patriarchal family economy and patriarchal consciousness are important elements in building a Socialist society.⁴¹ The author describes Chinese society as '*patriarchal socialism*' which means '*the socialisation of most, but not all, productive activities in the context of sustained, but reformed, patriarchal authority over women, marriage, and domestic economy*'.⁴² This explanation can also be applied to the social context of Vietnam. Vietnamese rural society is structured with feudal relations of power in which seniority and filial piety are still significant. In a family, the husband has control and authority over his wife and children. Kathleen Barry describes the relationship in Vietnamese family as follows:

...the family in Vietnam today is charged with feudal relation of power, and is structured around the veneration of elders and filial piety. Family feudalism is a stage in the historical development of the patriarchal family, just beyond slavery, where lord, or in the case of family, husband, holds complete control and authority over the household, whose members, children and wife, serve him. He may be ruthless or beneficent, but he is not held accountable outside his private fieldom: '*each man's home is his castle*'.⁴³

⁴⁰ Barry, Kathleen (ed.). *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. London: Macmillan Press, 1996. P. 12.

⁴¹ Stacey, Judith. *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1983. Pp. 265-266.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 217. According the Marxist feminist Michele Barrett, the sociologist Max Weber described the term '*patriarchy*' as '*a particular form of household organisation in which the father dominated other members of an extended kinship network and controlled the economic production of the household.*' See more in Barrett, Michele. *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*. London: Verso, 1980. Pp. 10-11.

⁴³ Barry, Kathleen (ed.). *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. P. 11.

The family economy system has been restored since the land laws were passed in 1988 and 1993. According to the new laws, land would be allotted to peasant families, and this replaced the work points system, which allowed individuals to earn work points according to the amount of work that he or she was assigned. Although it allowed peasant families to be more independent from the state, it brought back the old pattern that the husband became the head of family and had the right to make decisions on household business. Moreover, women had a minor role and almost no power in the Vietnam Peasants' Association, one of the largest social organisations in Vietnam. Almost all its members were men because they were given their role as the head of the households.⁴⁴ The family-based system also had an effect on women because the assistance subsidy to women for reproductive activities during the socialist period was decreased.⁴⁵

1986 In fact, the ideology of patriarchy was still exercised during the period of Socialism (1945-1975). If we look back at the slogans and programmes launched by the Vietnam Women's Union aimed at mobilising women, especially from the lower classes, we can see that women were required to share social responsibility with men rather than to be encouraged to demand complete freedom. To a certain extent, the wartime programmes, such as the 'Three Responsibilities', are comparable to the Confucian doctrines of three submissions and four virtues instructing women how they should behave. This is in fact a new way to set a patriarchal standard and impose it on women. Consequently, it can be concluded that patriarchy might have been challenged, but it was never abolished in Vietnamese rural society. Vietnamese peasant women still have to struggle against patriarchal thinking and the kinship system, and this is an enduring theme to be explored, debated and challenged in the post-1975 literary works.

To begin with, let us take a look at the award-winning and best-selling novel *Mảnh Đất Lắm Người Nhiều Ma* (A Plot of Land With Many People and Ghosts) by Nguyễn Khắc Trường. Here, it is shown that patriarchal ideology and the kinship system still play an important role in Vietnamese society, especially in the rural area. Ancestor worship is still commonly practised in Vietnam, especially in rural areas. If

⁴⁴ Tran Thi Que, 'Gender Issues in Vietnam's Development' in Norlund, Irene et al. (eds.). *Vietnam in a Changing World*. Surrey: Curzon, 1995. P. 199.

⁴⁵ Tran Thi Van Anh, 'Vietnam' in Tinker, Irene and Gale Summerfield (eds.). *Women's Rights in House and Land: China, Laos and Vietnam*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990. P. 101.

the ancestor of one family makes an oath, whatever it is, his children have to follow it and pass it to later generations, mainly through the patri-lineal line. It is generally believed that disasters will occur if a member of the family breaks the family's rule or disobeys the ancestor's order. In this novel, the author tells us how a peasant woman becomes a victim of an ancestor cult conflict and patriarchal concepts.

The story begins with a love triangle. Son, a beautiful girl, had a secret relationship with a married man, Vũ Đình Phúc. Her parents forced her to marry Trịnh Bá Hàm, a rich peasant in the village. The Trịnh Bá and Vũ Đình have been enemies for generations, and people from these two families have been competing with each other for political positions in the village. The love triangle between Son, Phúc and Hàm increased the hatred between the two families. As the author describes:

The old people said: the conflict caused by marriage and ricefield will take ten thousand years to revenge. This means nothing can make people hate each other longer than conflicts about marriage and land. The Trịnh Bá and Vũ Đình cannot share the same mat because of these two things! In those days, people from the two families fought in the middle of village's pagoda during the village fair. Their forefathers fought because of land and position. The position of village chief is small, but it is about dignity, winning and losing between two families. It also means who will get the heads of chickens and pigs, and who will get the best seat at the village hall. Both sides have been competitive. In the generation of Phúc, it is about love. It is weird that these two families spy and trick each other tirelessly.⁴⁶

After Son marries Hàm, she finds no happiness in her life. For Hàm, his wife is a reminder that he is inferior to Phúc because Phúc slept with Son before he married her. The conflict of ancestor cults also has an influence on the love relationship between Đào, Hàm's daughter and Tùng, a member of the Vũ Đình family. The Trịnh Bá family used Son as a tool to destroy the Vũ Đình. The trick is that the Trịnh Bá accuse Vũ Đình Phúc of having an affair with Son. Hàm and his relatives demand that in order to get Phúc, a party cadre, removed from his political position, Son should appear at the meeting of party members and the village committee and indict Phúc of

⁴⁶ Nguyễn Khắc Trường. *Mảnh Đất Lắm Người Nhiều Ma* (A Plot of Land with Many People and Ghosts). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1999. P. 25.

using his position to force her to have an affair with him. Son decides not to comply with this plan because she cannot bear to be humiliated by the rumours and gossip of other villagers. Instead, she chooses to commit suicide to escape the battle between the two families, however, her death does not lessen the antagonism between the two families. Hàm is concerned about the death of Son less than about his image and dignity. He is infuriated by the fact that his rival, Phúc, receives the news of Son's death and reaches her body before him. The excerpt below shows how self-centred and chauvinistic he is:

Trịnh Bá Hàm is angry not because of the death of his beautiful wife. It is because he realised that he was always late! Vũ Đình Phúc always comes first and is ahead of him! Even the death of Son, Phúc witnessed before him.⁴⁷

This theme is also emphasised in Dương Hương's famous novel, *Bến Không Chông* (A Watering Place for Women with No Husband) [1990], and Tạ Duy Anh's short story *Bước Qua Lời Nguyên* (Step Over the Oath) [1990]. These works show that the interference of parents in the courtship and marriage of their children remains widely practised and acceptable in the countryside of Vietnam.⁴⁸ In the novel *Bến Không Chông* (A Watering Place for Women with No Husband) Nghĩa and Hạnh decide to get married in spite of the disapproval from their families. The conflict between the two families starts when a girl from the Nguyễn clan is raped by a man from the Vũ clan. The Nguyễn vow that they will get revenge and regard the Vũ as their enemies. Although this incident happened long ago and the animosity between members of both sides decreased, the Nguyễn are still reluctant to give their blessings to the relationship between Nghĩa and Hạnh. The marriage is strongly opposed by the male members of the Nguyễn clan. They consider it is the duty of men to protect the pride of the clan and make sure that the ancestors' instructions are followed. For them, this marriage is humiliating for the clan. The attitude of female members of the Nguyễn is milder. In fact, they even have sympathy for Nghĩa and Hạnh, but they are afraid that disobeying the oath of the ancestors would bring about misfortune. Dương Hương argues that it is not the oath or offending the ancestors that can cause disaster for the family, but rather the dark side of human beings; namely, hatred, anger and jealousy.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 286-287.

⁴⁸ According to Lê Thi, a Vietnamese sociologist, marriages in agricultural society are arranged by parents, and sometimes have to be approved by the whole lineage. See more in Lê Thi. *The Role of the Family in the Formation of Vietnamese Personality*. Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 1999. P. 25.

An old member of the Nguyễn family is jealous of Nghĩa because he is the head of the clan. The old man burns the communal house where the whole clan comes to worship ancestors, and then spreads the rumour that the ancestors punished the clan for allowing Nghĩa to marry Hạnh.

The favouring of boys over girls is also mentioned in Dương Hương's novel, *Bến Không Chồng* (A Watering Place for Women With No Husband). Nghĩa's mother arranges for him to divorce Hạnh and marry another woman. She is desperate for a grandson who will continue the family line. Interestingly, people in the village, including Hạnh herself, tend to believe that it is Hạnh's fault for not having a son to carry a family's line. Nobody asks question about Nghĩa's possible infertility. When a couple don't have a child, it seems that the wife is the first person to be blamed. It is even the right of her mother-in-law to look for a new wife for her husband.

Dương Hương's novel strives to fight against this bias when the narrator relates how Nghĩa's injury from fighting in the war caused his infertility. The author includes this detail in order to show that it is not always a woman's fault when she does not have a baby. Also, that is not because of the curse or oath of ancestors. In the case of Nghĩa and Hạnh, it is the war that robbed them of their happiness.

A similar theme is also reflected in the controversial novel by Dương Thu Hương, *Những Thiên Đường Mù* (Paradise of the Blind) [1988], and the short story *Bước Qua Lời Nguyền* (Step Over the Oath) [1990] by Tạ Duy Anh. As shown in Dương Thu Hương's novel, in a peasant family, Quế always has to yield to her younger brother's demands simply because he is the only heir in the family. She is ready to sacrifice everything she has for her brother, even her marriage or the education of her own daughter. She prefers her daughter to starve and live modestly in order that she can spare some money to support her brother and his two sons. This is because of the traditional belief that only a son can carry forward the family's identity and honour. This is not something new, but a continuation of the long tradition of prejudice against women. As is clearly shown in popular sayings: 'one boy you can inscribe a descendent, ten girls you can write nil' and 'when there is but one man, you can call

it a presence; but ten women together will be counted as none'.⁴⁹ Another well-known expression is '*a hundred daughters are not worth a single testicle*.'⁵⁰

In the short story *Bước Qua Lời Nguyên* (Step Over the Oath), Tạ Duy Anh observes that the concept of cults still remains in Vietnamese rural villages. In the story, Lão Hứa, an enemy of the narrator's clan, was categorised as a landlord during the land reform. The narrator's father, categorised as middle-class peasant, used this opportunity to exploit Lão Hứa. In fact, the narrator's father did not have a direct conflict with Lão Hứa. The narrator's father was ordered by his father to hate and destroy Lão Hứa's family. The narrator strongly criticised the idea of *bố nợ con trả* (the children have to pay for their father's debt). Towards the end of the story, he chose to disobey his father and marry Lão Hứa's daughter.

The preference of male descendant is also evident in this short story. Lão Hứa believed that his clan could regain prosperity if he had a son. He was disappointed that his first child was a girl, and then insisted to his wife that they needed to have another child. However, his second child was still a daughter. He was angry and nearly killed the baby. Without a son, Lão Hứa became hopeless in recovering wealth and dignity for his family.

The criticism against the kinship system and the revelation of the true status of women in peasant families reflected in the post-1975 Vietnamese literature mark a new change in the representation of peasant women. In the wartime literature, writers never described the concrete problems of peasant women. Some writers, such as Nguyễn Thế Phương, Ngô Ngọc Bội and Vũ Thị Thường, mentioned that the problems of peasant women were mainly caused by conservative ideas, but they simply concluded that these problems would be soon resolved when more women were

⁴⁹ It is translated from Vietnamese 'Nhất Nam Viết Hữu, thập nữ viết vô'. Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang says that these patriarchal concepts are influenced by Confucian teaching. Confucianism was highly favoured during the Lê dynasty, but then lost its popularity from the sixteenth century onwards because it was difficult for the ruling class to follow the standards of Confucian precepts. However, Confucianism was restored again in 1802 under the Nguyễn Dynasty, and since then patriarchal ideology reasserted itself in Vietnamese society. See more in Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang, 'The Makings of the National Heroine' in *The Vietnam Review* (no.1, Autumn-Winter 1996), p.403.

⁵⁰ In a study of the Vietnamese family, Pham Van Bich reveals that peasant women, not only upper-class women, are also influenced by Confucian teachings, especially their '*ideas of gender hierarchy*'. For more information, see Pham Van Bich. *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta*. P. 245.

promoted to take charge in the political administration, as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, the short stories and novels written in the post-1975 period confirm that the introduction of Socialist large-scale industry and promotion of women's roles in the agricultural co-operatives cannot completely change the patriarchal view about women and permanently elevate their social status in village community. This is because the problems of peasant women are deeply rooted inside their families.

3.3.4. *The Question of Femininity and Motherhood*

The question of femininity and motherhood is almost completely absent in the wartime literature, whereas masculine characteristics are underlined. As portrayed in literary works, a good woman should be patriotic, heroic and brave on the battlefield, and hardworking on the collective farms. For example, the well-known peasant woman Nguyễn Thị Út, depicted in Nguyễn Thi's short stories, enjoyed fighting in battle even when she was pregnant. The issues of sensuality, sexual desire and love, which during the wartime were regarded as trivial subjects, did not reappear in literary works until after 1975.

A good example of this change is the short story *Những Mảnh Vụn* (The Blanket of Scraps) [1992], by Ngô Ngọc Bội. The main character of the story is Xuyến, a middle-aged peasant woman, who in her youth had volunteered to be a guerrilla fighter. Due to the unsanitary environment and the shortage of clean water Xuyến, like other women volunteers, lost her hair and stopped menstruating. A female doctor urges her to try and regain womanhood:

This duty (participating in the battlefield) is the highest and most precious of all, and full of sacrifice. The dead are already gone, and whoever ends up disabled gets their name on the list at the Bureau of Disabled Veterans. But you, if I discharged you I wouldn't know what to write in your file. My conscience demands that I have to restore to you your right to be a woman.⁵¹

⁵¹ Ngô Ngọc Bội. *Những Mảnh Vụn* (The Blanket of Scraps). Translated by Rosemary Nguyen in Dan Duffy (ed.). *Literary News: Nine Stories from the Việt Nam Writers Union Newspaper, Báo Văn Nghệ*. Lạc Việt 16. New Haven: Yale University Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1997. P. 113.

Xuyén is then sent for treatment. She spends her time making a blanket from scraps. When the peace treaty is signed in 1973, she returns to her village to take care of her old mother. Because of disastrous flooding, Xuyén and other village women have to go to Hanoi to earn a living by begging. She takes this opportunity to visit Thu, who had joined the youth brigade with her during 1960s. When she arrives at the government housing block, she finds the blanket of scraps she made during her treatment, twenty-two years earlier. It now belongs to a widower named Biền, who is a journalist. This blanket of 1,534 scraps helps link them together. They tell each other about their lives. Biền asks Xuyén to stay over at his place that evening, but is disappointed to find out that Xuyén is like '*a chunk of rotten wood*'. Xuyén asks him to help her recover her womanhood:

'I beg you, I implore you, don't scorn me, don't desert me. My life is almost over and I still don't know how this is. Please, Biền, help me be a woman. Do you want me to die still a... Thu, she's got a baby. She's got her heart desire. What crime have I committed that life should abandon me like this?'

In truth, Biền was not the type to be terribly concerned about propriety. As the elders always say, when a snake comes to your door, you'd be a fool not to thrash it... He once again took Xuyén in his arms and plunged in, rolling and twisting, using every art and every trick he knew. But still Xuyén lay there, stiff and impassive.

'Blast it! You're not a woman anymore, little one.'

'Who says? I still have all the parts.'

'That's sure, but they are just empty shells, nothing more. They've got no life in them. Your breasts have withered completely away. The only things still visible there are two little buttons, like a man's chest. They're useless. And as for this, probably it's only good for excretory purposes. It's shrivelled up as small as a clamshell.'⁵²

However, Xuyén is not as interested in having a romantic relationship as she yearns to be a mother. As she compares her life to Thu's:

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.111.

'... I received a letter from Thu saying that she'd had a baby. I cried up a storm when I read that letter. So Thu had gotten her wish, her life was fulfilled; but what about me and my life?'⁵³

Xuyến's dream to have a child is shared by many female veterans in the post-war period, especially in village communities. Many Vietnamese women sacrificed not only their youth, but also their reproductive capacities and opportunities of marriage for the war. The story of Xuyến told in Ngô Ngọc Bội's short story is by no means an exaggeration.⁵⁴ Rather, it reflects the pressure felt by many Vietnamese women who wanted to fulfil what Karen Turner called a '*Vietnamese woman's most fundamental human right-the experience of childbirth in her youth and the care of a filial adult in her old age*'.⁵⁵ In her article, Karen Turner reveals that 'asking for a child' became a popular practice for the middle-aged women in the countryside of Vietnam. While it is still difficult for society to accept women having children outside wedlock, the legal system adjusted to the post-war reality and the decisions of these single mothers by affirming their rights of motherhood.⁵⁶

During the war, a Vietnamese woman may have had to fight shoulder to shoulder with men, and she was judged by her manly performance. However, once the war ended, she would be assessed according to how womanly she was. Even during the war, untraditional behaviour on the part of female cadres was not always accepted among the peasants. This is reflected through the comment made by one older woman:

Female cadres [have]...ridiculous ways of living, which are completely out of step with the traditional manner. They are educated by the Front and so they have that manly way of talking and behaving. They liked to use terms that I had no idea what they meant, lived with male cadres and don't care about

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.119.

⁵⁴ The interview of the president of the People's Committee of Binh Tri Thien province confirms that Ngô Ngọc Bội's short story is realistic. He revealed that, '*after thirty years of war, many (women) could not marry. In many cases couples just married and went to the war. Afterward, they are too old to have children.*' Quoted in Tetreault, Mary Ann, 'Women and Revolution in Vietnam' in Barry, Kathleen (ed.). *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. London: Macmillan Press, 1996. P. 47.

⁵⁵ Turner, Karen, 'War and the Rights of Motherhood: Vietnamese Women in the 1990s' in Harvard Asia Quarterly, <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~asiactr/haq/200102/0102a005.htm>.

⁵⁶ Also, there are a number of single women want to have children by artificial insemination because of a sex ratio imbalance in the post-war period. For example, in 1992, the ratio between women and men is 53.29%: 47.7%. Barry, Kathleen (ed.). *Vietnam's Women in Transition*. London: Macmillan Press, 1996. P. 8.

cooking and housekeeping. As soon as they open their mouths, words like construction, criteria, struggle, etc., come out.⁵⁷

In the wartime, women were praised for their contribution to the national cause, but they were also expected to fulfil female duties. To get married and have children seems to be the ultimate measure by which women are evaluated. This is a dual standard weighing on women. An example of this attitude is given by Tạ Duy Anh in his short story, Xưa Kia Chị Đẹp Nhất Làng (She used to Be the Most Beautiful in the Village) [1990]. In this story, the author gives a clear picture of a village girl who tries to compromise between social obligation and personal desires. Túc is regarded as the most beautiful girl in the village. She also won the village festival contest which included cooking skills and childcare. The contest was normally arranged in order that a mother could choose a perfect daughter-in-law for herself, a good wife for her son, and also an ideal mother for her grandchildren. As the war went on, a great number of boys were called to join the army while the girls stayed behind and worked as labourers in the rice fields and as guards for the village.

During the war against the Americans, Vietnamese girls were asked to restrain themselves from love and sexual desire. The Party concluded that, 'the weak points of women are that they are credulous and cannot resist love'. Therefore, the 'Ba Khoan' or the 'Three Postponements' were introduced. That is, first, to postpone falling in love. If one is already in love, then one is asked to postpone getting married. If one really wants to get married, then one should postpone having children.⁵⁸ Túc and the other girls in the village, though joking and teasing each other about having boyfriends or love affairs, followed these instructions attentively and attempted to complete all the missions they were assigned.

When the war is over, Túc, at the age of 35, still remains single and waits for the man she loves. He is a soldier who stopped at her village during his journey to the front. However, he never returns. This has an affect on her emotionally. Túc's search for true love is not understood by the people in her village. As the narrator tells us:

⁵⁷ Wiegersma, Nancy. *Vietnam: Peasant Land, Peasant Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. P. 210.

⁵⁸ Taylor, Sandra C. *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution*. P. 64.

The villagers start discussing Túc. Some women whose husbands are deaf or blind think that they are still better than Túc because at least they are married and have children. They humiliate and criticise her as mad, romantic, crazy etc. Village people are right when they say that our soldiers go everywhere, and there must be many things for these soldiers to think about when the war is over. Túc's soldier also has to go back to his parents and home village. They conclude that each of us is already predestined and has to complete his or her duty. For Túc, her duty is to be a wife of someone in order to complete the duty that God assigns for all women.⁵⁹

Túc leaves the village and tries to look for her soldier among the wounded veterans in hospitals. She is unable to find him, but meets an injured and hopeless war veteran. Soon after their relationship has started and Túc realised that she is pregnant, the veteran dies from a disease he had contracted during the war. When she returned to the village with a child out of wedlock, she is condemned by the whole village. It seems that nobody can remember that she was once the most beautiful girl in the village.

Tạ Duy Anh's short story throws light on a different aspect of rural women. In Vietnamese literature, peasant women are normally idealised as self-sacrificing mothers and wives with high virtues, but at the same time they are characterised as conservative about love and sexual desire. Poverty and deprivation in the countryside would not allow a peasant girl much time to think about love. Through the depiction of Túc, the author offers a different image of Vietnamese peasant women from those depicted in the wartime literature. In fact, not only in Tạ Duy Anh's short story, but also in the novels written by his contemporaries like Dương Hương and Nguyễn Khắc Trường, peasant women are depicted as dreamy and romantic. This characterisation of peasant women is not merely a fictional imagination, but to some extent a reflection of true characteristics of Vietnamese peasant women. As shown in a folksong, peasant girls are not only materialistically concerned, but can also be rebellious and romantic.

Let's leave loyalty to the king for our father,
And filial piety for our mothers,

⁵⁹ Tạ Duy Anh *Xưa Kia Chị Đẹp Nhất Làng* (She used to Be the Most Beautiful in the Village' in *Bước Qua Lời Nguyền* (Step Over the Oath: A Collection of Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1990. Pp. 16-17.

And keep love for ourselves.⁶⁰

However, the topic of femininity and female sexual desire is largely ignored in the wartime literature. This is not surprising because the production and reception of literature in the previous period were influenced by political agendas. It is known that no other subjects prevail in Vietnamese literature than the political. Anything outside the political realm would be marginalized and underestimated. The issues of love, male-female relationships and marriage are often excluded from literary works. Dương Thu Hương's view on writing can be a good example of this mentality:

A great writer says: the biggest tragedy of mankind is love. For me, however, I live in a country where there are miseries, injustices, and a whole family of peasants committed suicide by insecticide. Therefore, the topic of love is not the first priority. I just have to write about the topics that are more pressing.⁶¹

Thus, when Ngô Ngọc Bội and Tạ Duy Anh depicts women's dream of having a romantic relationship and being a mother, it is a significant change in the representation of peasant women. That is, in their works, the depiction of peasant women is not related to any political movements, as it is often seen in the wartime literature. Instead, both Ngô Ngọc Bội and Tạ Duy Anh change the focus from political consciousness prevailing in the writing about peasant women into the daily life concerns of peasant women. *re interpretation of collectivisation + individualism*

In the case of Ngô Ngọc Bội, the change is even more interesting. The character Xuyên in the short story *Những Mảnh Vụn* (The Blanket of Scraps) is different from his stereotyped peasant women in his wartime short stories, such as Chì Thản who is selfless and industrious. However, this should not be seen as a contradiction of his literary creativity, but rather the continuity of his wartime writing. If peasant women were asked to sacrifice selflessly for the national cause, they should be given happiness. Ngô Ngọc Bội shows his sympathy for peasant women, whose portrayals have been manipulated and distorted by political reasons and the process of mass mobilisation, by voicing their loss and sufferings. It is what the peasant women want,

⁶⁰ Mai Thi Tu, 'The Vietnamese Woman Yesterday and Today', p. 193.

⁶¹ Interview with Dương Thu Hương in *Tram Hoa Vãn Nở trên Quê Hương: Cao Trào Văn Nghệ Phấn Kháng tại Việt Nam (1986-1989)*. Lê Trần Publishing Company: Reseda, CA, 1990. P. 196.

not what the nation wants from them, that Ngô Ngọc Bội tries to convey in *Những Mảnh Vụn* (The Blanket of Scraps).

3.3.5. *The Victims of Sexual Harassment*

The following paragraphs will discuss two short stories: *Gã Thọt* (The Lamé Man) [1990] by Tạ Duy Anh and *Mẹ Chồng Tôi* (My Mother-in-law) [1993], by Nguyễn Minh Chính. The latter was selected as an interesting short story, set in the 1993, by the influential literary journal *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and the Arts). Both stories, though written in the post-1975 period, are set during the war. They reveal how peasant women were sexually harassed by male villagers or colleagues in the co-operatives and production units. This revelation can be seen as a departure from the wartime literature, in which writers tried to avoid mentioning the dark-side of society so as not to discourage or distract people from the struggle.

Let us begin with the short story *Gã Thọt* (The Lamé Man) [1990]. Tạ Duy Anh tells of how women in a remote village suffer from sexual desire, and this allows men to sexually exploit them while their husbands are enlisted in the armed forces. The story takes place in a small village where there are only women, children and old people because the men have been recruited by the military. Only a man called Quán was not accepted by the army because he was lame. He enjoyed being the only man in the village, and became proud of himself because women needed him as a replacement for their husbands.

He begins to look down on women. He feels that he is full of strength and he can get any woman in the village. Actually, he is right. He sleeps around, moving from one woman to another. He knows that they all have been waiting for him. Those women offer themselves to him as if he were their god. He is the strongest man roaming over a kingdom of women.⁶²

Of course, the author does not conclude that all the women fall for him. Some women are able to restrain themselves and avoid this lame man. The purpose of this story is three-fold. First, Tạ Duy Anh apparently avoids simplistic stereotype and black-and-

⁶² Tạ Duy Anh. *Gã Thọt* (The Lamé Man) in *Bước Qua Lời Nguyễn* (Step Over the Oath: A Collection of Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1990. P. 128.

white images of peasant women. The portrayal of peasant women in his work shows both their good and bad qualities. Secondly, he tries to challenge the glorification of peasant women in literary and political discourses. As heroic and self-sacrificing as they are, those women are still human beings who cannot always hide their desires and live up to moral standards. And thirdly, the criticism is directed against the government for neglecting the oppression of the women.

The short story *Mẹ chồng Tôi* (My Mother-in-law) has a similar theme. The author reveals two interesting points. First is the harmonious relationship between a woman and her mother-in-law. Conflict between mother and daughter-in-law is typical in Vietnamese society⁶³ but Nguyễn Minh Chính describes how the difficult conditions of the Vietnam-America War help create understanding and sympathy between the two parties. In the story, Thuận, a young peasant girl becomes pregnant, while her husband is fighting in the front, by a man with whom she works at the co-operative office. Her mother-in-law is understanding of her situation and keeps this incident secret from other villagers. As her own husband joined the army and was killed during the resistance against the French, the mother-in-law understands the loneliness of Thuận.

The second interesting point is that women are prone to sexual harassment by their own colleagues. This topic is rarely discussed in the wartime literature. The head of the production unit tries to harass Thuận. It is clear that he has no respect for his female colleagues. This episode is similar to what Dương Thu Hương witnessed. She recalled that a woman was treated as a sex object by a brigade leader. It was even worse in this case because the victim and witnesses failed to expose his crime because this brigade leader was a powerful man in the province. Also, they did not want to affect the reputation of the party.⁶⁴ As shown in *Mẹ chồng Tôi* (My Mother-in-law) and what Dương Thu Hương witnessed, there was no genuine sense of comradeship between men and women. Moreover, in order to keep the reputation of the office or production unit intact, this kind of incident was always kept quiet.

⁶³ Stephen O'Harrow observes that, 'indeed, probably nowhere in the world's folk literature is there a richer mine of sayings than the one found in Vietnam about mothers-in-law, especially regarding the hatred that arises between the husband's mother and the young wife.' See more in O'Harrow, Stephen, 'Vietnamese Women and Confucianism: Creating Spaces from Patriarchy' in Karim, Wazir Jahan (ed.). 'Male' and 'Female' in *Developing Southeast Asia*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995. P. 167.

⁶⁴ Interview with Dương Thu Hương in *Tram Hoa Vãn Nữ trên Quê Hương: Cao Trào Văn Nghệ Phản Kháng tại Việt Nam (1986-1989)*. P. 195.

3.3.6. *Rising up against Local Bullies*

In the late 1980s, the maladministration and corruption of local officials were stridently complained. It was a dominant subject in the pages of newspapers and journals, especially in the form of literary reportage which brought public attention to the countryside problems. Out of a number of successful reportages that appeared in *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and the Arts) in 1988, *Người Đàn Bà Quỳ* (A Woman Kneels) by Trần Khắc and *Bông Lúa Nổi Giận* (Outraged Rice) by Hà Văn Thuỷ depict the rebellious character of Vietnamese peasant women. This reminds us of Ngô Tất Tố's famous novel, *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light is Out), which depicts a memorable female protagonist, Chị Dậu: a peasant woman who rises up against corrupted local mandarins and colonial lackeys (see Chapter 1). Likewise, it is revealed in these two reportages that peasant women never yielded to the oppressive rules by local cadres.

In *Người Đàn Bà Quỳ* (A Woman Kneels), Trần Khắc tells us about how Bà Khang tried to make a prosecution against Chầu, the chairman of the co-operative. Chầu claimed that the co-operative wanted the land of Bà Khang for the building of a guesthouse for co-operative visitors. Bà Khang was compensated with a smaller piece of land. What made her angry was the fact that Chầu gave the land to his daughter instead of building the guesthouse. So, the effort to make a trial against Chầu began with the support of village people. Bà Khang had to make a journey from her village to the government office in Hanoi to demand for justice. As she expresses her frustration: '*we, peasants, do not need much money but we do not want to be considered as weed or grass.*'⁶⁵

Similarly, in *Bông Lúa Nổi Giận* (Outraged Rice), an elderly mother Năm Hà, with the support of other villagers, plans to bring a prosecution against the corrupted local leaders. Through these accounts, it is shown that the problems in the countryside were not properly resolved. Local government offices in districts and provinces did not want to encourage a prosecution against local officials, normally party members, because of the fear of losing face and reputation. Therefore, a request for legal action was turned down. In *Bông Lúa Nổi Giận* (Outraged Rice), the women's organisation

⁶⁵ Trần Khắc. *Người Đàn Bà Quỳ* (A Woman Kneels) in *Tập Truyện-Ký Chọn Lọc* (Selected Short Stories and Reportages). Hanoi: NXB Nông Nghiệp, 1988. P. 25.

played a vital role in fighting against the corruption of local officials. Many peasants in the village lost faith in other leaders, except Năm Hà, who was the leader of the village women's organisation. She was asked to be a representative of the people to bring a prosecution against corrupted local leaders. Like Bà Khang, Năm Hà was brave and determined to bring down village bullies and acquire justice despite all the threats against her.

The authors of both stories highlight the difficult life of peasant women, and accentuate their strong character and fighting spirit. The worries of Bà Khang and Năm Hà were shared by many other peasant women. Bà Khang's husband died in the French resistance and her only son was still at the front. For Năm Hà, her son was killed in the battle in Cambodia. The author of *Bông Lúa Nổi Giận* (Outraged Rice) also criticises the poor conditions and lack of supplies in the army. With other members of the village women's organisation, Năm Hà managed to send dried food to soldiers. These women exemplify those Vietnamese mothers who contributed so much for the nation, having to worry about their children in the frontline while struggling against village bullies at home. The plight of these mothers implied the government's failure not only to bring them a better life, but also to protect them from oppression. The journalist Hà Văn Thuỷ bitterly questions: *'life has made us familiar with many difficulties, shall we be also familiar with the tears of these mothers?'*⁶⁶

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Some conclusions can be drawn from this study of the representation of peasant women in post-1975 literature and the socio-political contexts that have had an influence on the changes and continuity of the images of peasant women. First, the way in which peasant women are portrayed is closely related to the political agenda. In the period between 1930 and 1945, the victimisation of peasant women was used as a tool to criticise the colonial administration. In the 1945-75 period, literature took part in mobilising the force of peasant women in the building of a socialist nation. Post-1975 literature reflected the failure of the Communist government and its Socialist ideology to eradicate the residue of the old values in the countryside, including the patriarchal concepts and the kinship system. The pictures of women in

⁶⁶ Hà Văn Thuỷ. *Bông Lúa Nổi Giận* (Outrageous Rice) in *Tập Truyện-Ký Chọn Lọc* (Selected Short Stories and Reportages). Hanoi: NXB Nông Nghiệp, 1988. P. 77.

the remote villages suffering from the fact that they could not fulfil their sexual desire or their dreams to become mothers, as shown in the works of Ngô Ngọc Bội and Tạ Duy Anh, was an alternative way of criticising and ridiculing the rhetoric and promises of the revolution. Thus, it can be said that the construction of peasant women in Vietnamese literature is not only gender-based, but also politically bound.

Secondly, the stereotypes of peasant women changed through the transition of the socio-political context from war to peace. The wartime literature emphasises masculine qualities, whereas the post-1975 literature tries to revitalise feminine characteristics. The highlighting of feminisation, motherhood and womanhood responds to post-war social expectations about the role of women, not only of the peasantry but also of other social classes. According to the literary texts, after the war ended, women were expected to return to a home-making role rather than continuing with their social and political activities. This is just another way to reinforce patriarchal standards imposed on women.

Thirdly, the representation of peasant women in Vietnamese literature is also interrelated to the issue of social class. It can be observed that the problems of peasant women are more emphasised in literary works by male writers originating from peasant backgrounds than by female writers from the middle-class. It is noticeable that the works written by female writers, such as Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ, Phan Thị Vàng Anh, and Y Ban in the post-war period⁶⁷ respond to the problems that concerned middle-class women in urban areas. Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú, a female writer from the older generation, wrote a lot about agricultural collectivisation and rural problems in wartime. However, her post-war writings show that she shifted her interest to exploring and discussing the daily problems experienced by urban women, which are probably more familiar to her.

The Vietnamese literary scene continues to be dominated by male writers. Female writers are few and remain in the background. That is why, in male-produced texts, the construction of peasant women is never free from a gender-biased vision and the stereotypes of peasant women are entirely shaped by men's ideas and experiences. The humanist concept of male writers may enable the exposure of patriarchal

⁶⁷ For instance, in the collection of short stories written by female authors, *Truyện Ngắn Chọn Lọc của 14 tác giả nữ* (Selected Short Stories by 14 Female Writers). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1995.

influences and the sufferings of peasant women in literature, but an attempt to liberate women is not yet evident in the male-dominated literary world. Although the stories of Vietnamese peasant women are the inspiration for many literary works, peasant women do not write. It is unfortunate that peasant women cannot represent themselves.

Chapter 4: The Countryside versus the City

This chapter focuses on how the social relationships between rural and urban are portrayed in the post-1975 literature. The post-1975 period is a transitional period between the decline of the Socialist economic model on the one hand and the growth of industrialisation and a market economy on the other. The local village is now exposed to the outside world by urbanisation and industrial growth. Post-1975 literature reveals not only the classic conflict between the rural and urban areas, but also between the local traditions and new values brought into villages by industrialisation and consumerism. These works also reflect the social transformation from peasant guerrilla culture into the urban capitalist development. But besides challenging local village traditions, urbanisation and industrial development can be seen as a threatening force to the loss of national identity and village's local tradition.

4.1. The Rural and Urban in Vietnamese Context

↳ not only,
too-sided

The tension between the city and the countryside is an enduring theme in modern Vietnamese literature. The gap between the countryside and city was not remarkable in Vietnamese society until the industrial development under the French colonialism. But when it came, it brought many changes to the economic and social relations among Vietnamese people. As Levan points out:

The peasant that was once the foundation of the country's economy was now subject to the control of business enterprises owned mostly by the French and other foreigners such as the Chinese and the Indians. The cities became the centres of the new economic life, and the urban mentality, accordingly, changed rapidly with material development. As a result a sharp contrast was created in every aspects between the metropolitan areas and the countryside, but most noticeable was the clear distinction between the new social disposition of the city folks and that of the majority population, the peasantry. The expression *nhà quê* (peasant or country people) was used often by the urban dwellers to slight their backward, uneducated rural compatriots who were still living in the most despicable conditions.¹

¹ Levan, Hoa John. *Cultural Foundation of Ho Chi Minh's Revolutionary Ideology*. PhD thesis. Northwestern University, 1989. Pp. 65-66.

Thus, it is not surprising that the representation of the city and countryside in Vietnamese literature in the early twentieth century was closely related to the question of tradition versus modernity. It was highlighted by a group of urban-based writers, Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (Self-Reliant Literary Group) in the 1930s, who wrote a number of articles and literary pieces dealing with the issues of modernising the nation and questioning traditional values. For example, Hoàng Đạo, a prominent member of the group, was critical of Vietnamese tradition and backwardness in village life. He pointed out that Vietnamese people were influenced by Confucian beliefs and did not allow their minds go beyond their villages. They always thought of the reputation of their families and villages and the fortunes of their own lineages more than anything else.² Hoàng Đạo saw the countryside as symbolic of backwardness, and believed that the only way to bring happiness to the peasantry was to modernise and urbanise the countryside. As he conveyed:

As for the peasants, we have pointed out their material and spiritual difficulties, and made efforts to find the origins of those difficulties, so that some day, a day that we hope is rapidly approaching, they will be able to live a better and more prosperous life.³

Another principal member of the group, Nhất Linh, expressed the same idea about the countryside. In the short story *Hai Vẽ Đẹp* (Two Beauties), Doãn, an artist, tries to escape from the unpleasant city and goes off to explore the nature and beauty of the countryside. However, he is disturbed by the poverty and rustic look of the countryside. Nhất Linh's contemporaries, such as the realist writers Vũ Trọng Phụng and Tam Lang, noted the same problems. They portrayed the migration of rural folk who tried to escape from the poverty in the countryside by seeking fortunes in the city. What they usually found were low-paid jobs, such as rickshaw pullers and household servants. In their works, the country people are depicted as ignorant and helpless victims whereas city people are portrayed as corrupt and untrustworthy.⁴ In

² Woodside, Alexander, 'The Development of Social Organisations in Vietnamese Cities in the Late Colonial Period' in *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 4, Issue 1, 1971. P. 40.

³ Hoàng Đạo, 'Dừng Chân Đứng Lại' (Stop Walking, Stand Still) in Mchale, Shawn Frederick. *Printing, Power, and the Transformation of Vietnamese Culture, 1920-1945*. PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1995. P. 37. It was first published in *Ngày Nay* number 148, 4 February 1939.

⁴ See more in Lockhart, Greg and Monique Lockhart. *The Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996.

general, the representation of the city and the countryside in early twentieth-century Vietnamese literature well reflects what Raymond Williams noticed about the antagonism between these two communities:

On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalised. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication and light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation.⁵

The representation of the city and countryside began to change in the literary works written in the northern part of the country, especially after the Communist Party came to power. Literary pages became increasingly dominated by scenes of the countryside whereas the city was almost forgotten. An explanation of this change is the Vietnamese Communist Party's attitude towards the relationship between the city and the countryside. This can be analysed as the influence of the Maoist model rather than the Marxist one. While Marx believed that the 'urbanisation of the countryside' was necessary because it was the prelude to the eradication of the separation between the rural and the urban in the communist state, the Vietnamese Communist Party's policy of basing the revolution on the role of the peasants in the countryside more closely matched the Maoist theory and practice that emphasised the 'ruralisation of the city' while the role of intellectuals and town is marginalized.⁶ A remarkable example of Maoist 'ruralism' in Vietnam is the implementation of the land reform policy in the 1950s.⁷ Christine Pelzer White explains that one effect of the land reform programme, among its many impacts on Vietnamese society, was to change the relationship between the city and the country. As she states:

Land reform did more than just give the peasants land; it changed the balance of power between the city and state and the countryside. Peasants with the

⁵ Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1985. P. 1.

⁶ For a discussion on the different view between the Marxists and the Maoists, see more in Meisner, Maurice, 'Utopian Socialist Themes in Maoism' in Lewis, John Wilson (ed.). *Peasants, Rebellion and Communist Revolution in Asia*. California: Stanford University Press, 1974. Pp. 207-252.

⁷ For more information about the land reform, see Chapters 1 and 5.

means of self-sufficiency in their control would have to be induced rather than forced to grow and sell a surplus, let alone to make sacrifices for the sake of the wider society outside their family and village. The implications of giving the peasants control of their own land and labour and therefore of the harvest, the product of the land and labour, was that a flow of food from the countryside to the city to feed workers, craftspeople and intellectuals and to the state to feed soldiers and civil servants would have to be recompensed by an increased reciprocal flow of goods such as cloth, and agricultural implements and services such as health care and education.⁸

As the revolution was mainly carried out in the village, writers and artists used their works to highlight the importance of peasants and the countryside. The land reform policy and the attempt to turn Vietnam into a Socialist country by the Vietnamese Communist Party, as White's observations suggest, enabled the countryside to take precedence over the city. This imbalanced relationship between the city and the country is clearly reflected in literature. It is noticeable that from the late 1940s up to the end of war in 1975, the countryside is much more strongly favoured than the city in literary works. Many writers headed to the countryside in order to find out about and portray what the Vietnamese countryside was really like. The rural people and village customs became an object to be studied, explored and conveyed in literature. Hence, it can be said that the texts written from the late 1940s to the early 1970s reflect the negotiation of power between the city and the country. Even after the war was over, a number of studies continued to emphasise the importance of the countryside in Vietnamese history.⁹ — *Her wasn't changed!*

Meanwhile, Party leaders also realised the economic sluggishness of rural area. In February 1970, General Secretary Lê Duẩn called for the development of heavy industry and the programme called *thành thị hoá nông thôn* or the 'urbanisation of the countryside'.¹⁰ After the Renovation was announced and the open-door policy was adopted in the late 1980s, the process of urbanisation was more evident. At the same

⁸ White, Christine Pelzer, 'The Peasants and the Party in the Vietnamese Revolution' in D.B. Miller (ed.), *Peasants and Politics: Grass Roots to Change in Asia*. Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1978. P. 44.

⁹ For example, Viện Sử Học (Institute of History). *Nông Thôn Việt Nam trong Lịch Sử* (Vietnamese Countryside in History). Vol. 1. Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1977, and the second volume of this title was published in 1978.

¹⁰ Woodside, Alexander, 'Decolonisation and Agricultural Reform in Northern Vietnam' in *Asian Survey*, vol. X, no. 8, 1970. P. 722.

time, the village community was more exposed to outsiders. It is suggested in a study by Kristin Pelzer that the Renovation was a continuity of the openness of the village society to the world outside. Rural villages were first penetrated by the forces of international economy and capitalism under the French. Then, the Socialist transformation monopolised the agricultural activities and abolished '*intervillage and national exchange*', including the market system that had already existed in the pre-colonial period. Since the free market was reintroduced by the Renovation Plan, the countryside has been exposed to the influx of imported products and affected by consumerism.¹¹

Tension between the city and countryside became increasingly intense in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. This is probably because this was a transitional period, from centralised control towards a more liberal atmosphere in both economic and political activities. Through the process of political changes and economic transformation, the countryside was threatened by the expansion of the city and industrial development whereas the city was still regarded as vulnerable to corruption and immorality. As Đỗ Mười, the Party General Secretary in the early 1990s, once commented:

The city is...the place hostile forces consider the prime group for 'peaceful evolution', causing political disorder, sabotaging the economy, causing social and cultural pollution, aiming to overthrow the regime established by great personal sacrifices.¹²

In the meantime, city dwellers became increasingly concerned about the migration of people from the countryside. They were afraid that village traditions and rural behaviour brought to town by rural migrants would replace the city customs. According to the historian Li Tina, the migrants did not expect to change their style of life when they arrived in the city. They normally relied on and lived together with other villagers. Close links were maintained between people from the same village to the extent that city inhabitants were worried that it would cause the process of *nông thôn hoá*, the 'ruralisation' of the city rather than *thành thị hoá* 'urbanisation' of the

¹¹ Pelzer, Kristin, 'Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Renovation in Vietnam Đổi Mới as Dialogue and Transition in Gender Relations' in Turley, William S. and Mark Selden (eds.). *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism*. Oxford and Colorado: Westview Press, 1993. Pp. 309-333.

¹² Quoted in Taylor, Philip. *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001. P. 136.

countryside.¹³ The view expressed by Đỗ Mười and the worries of the city people indicated in the study of Li Tina clearly suggest that the antagonism and prejudice between the city and countryside remained and was probably intensified in post-war Vietnamese society.

Moreover, the conflict between the city and countryside was, as Raymond Williams stressed, inevitable under the development of market economy. As he argues:

[These] two apparently opposite and separate projections-country and city-were in fact indissolubly linked, within the general and crisis-ridden development of a capitalist economy which had itself produced this division in its modern forms. With the increasing development of a more fully organised agrarian capitalism, ever more closely linked with the general money market, this is clearly even more, now and then.¹⁴

Thus, the alienation between the city and countryside portrayed in the post-1975 texts is the reflection of real situations in post-war society in which the attention of the state and public has shifted from the rural villages to the city as the economic and political centre. This process of economic and political transformation not only causes frustration among rural people and their sympathisers but also provokes a social awareness of the cultural images and the identity of the nation. Having discussed the concept of the rural and the urban in the Vietnamese context, we will now turn to how this topic is articulated and discussed in the post-1975 literature.

4.2. The Country versus the City in Post-1975 Literature

As it is suggested here, and will be argued in the subsequent parts, that it is not merely the interconnections of urban and rural locales that are depicted in Modern Vietnamese literature, but also the conflict of values associated with urban and rural settings. On the one hand, the contrasts between city and countryside drawn in the post-1975 narratives are a continuation of the 1930s debate on tradition versus

¹³ Tina, Li. *Peasants on the Move: Rural-Urban Migration in Hanoi Region*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996. P. 45.

¹⁴ Williams, Raymond, 'Between Country and City' in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy and Socialism*. London and New York: Verso, 1989. P. 227. Although Williams' argument was based on the development of English society, it can be applied in the case of Vietnam where the market economy is replacing the Socialist model.

modernisation, but on the other hand they unveil the concerns, responses and attitudes of Vietnamese writers and people towards socio-political changes and industrial growth in post-war society.

4.2.1. The Continuation of the Wartime Project

After the Communist Party took control of the whole country in 1975, the prioritisation of the rural over the urban was extended to the South. It is evident that peasants and the countryside were the main themes in literature of the North throughout the 1945-1975 period. However, it is also noticeable that during this period writers and intellectuals in the South paid little attention to the countryside and its people. As is explained in Võ Phiến's study of the development of literature in South Vietnam during 1954-1975:

The mass of intellectuals, artists, and students, the educated men and women of the South lived in cities, and all their activities took place in cities. Their works remained mostly in the cities, and were not circulated to distant rural areas. That was one reason why there was no country readership in the period of '54-'75. The other reason was that in the general situation of the South at that time, the rural people only played a minor role, and therefore were not given enough attention. Their presence in works of arts became more and more insignificant. No wonder that they became indifferent to the cultures of cities and towns.¹⁵

Influenced by the Socialist style of writing practised in the North with its focus on the rural masses, once the country was unified, writers in the South began to pay more attention to peasants and the countryside. The short story, *Xa Thành Phố* (Far from the City), written in 1977, by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, a Southern writer, is an example of this trend. The work reaffirms the wartime preference of the countryside to the city. It is also an example of how ruralism was brought to the South. The theme of the story is similar to that of Nam Cao's short story, *Đôi Mắt* (A Pair of Eyes) [1948]: it focuses on awakening the social consciousness of city people and changing their attitude towards rural folk. Writing during the early days of Socialist construction, Nam Cao

¹⁵ Võ Phiến. *Literature in South Vietnam (1954-1975)*. Translated by Võ Đình Mai. Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1992. P. 44.

tries to show that peasants could be a main force of revolution and national salvation. They are no longer victims of feudal and colonial regimes, the hope and future of the revolution being reliant on their contribution. Then, *Xa Thành Phố* (Far from the City), written two years after the war ended, is a reminder that the sacrifice and contribution of country people should be recognised and that the city people, who live a more comfortable life, should do something in return.

Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn opens the story with Saigon and its atmosphere after the end of the war. He recounts the people's worries, fears, uncertainties and hopes in relation to the new government. After the establishment of the Communist government in the South, intellectuals and government officers were required to take ideological classes, mainly based on the theories of Marx and Lenin. The story is told from the perspective of Hà, a medical student. Like other students, she is also required to attend ideological courses and to work in the countryside for three months. At first, Hà does not want to join this programme because she does not want to live in the countryside.

I am familiar with living in the city. I can't imagine what it is like in the countryside. I have known the countryside from what is portrayed in newspapers, novels and films produced by the puppet government's propaganda office.¹⁶ These are pictures of villages devastated by warfare. The countryside is also the scenery where green rice fields and rubber trees are a background for hamlets scattered along the road to Vũng Tàu, a destination for summer holidays. It includes the animated pictures of fruit orchards in Lái Thiêu and Thủ Đức where students headed during weekends or harvest seasons, just to get away from the city and to try a different atmosphere. The countryside I know is of those fat women selling rice and fish in Southern provinces or markets around Saigon. It is those country girls wearing loose fitting blouses wandering at the West port as if lost chicken were looking for their mother. Or it is a group of children shouting and selling fruits at bus stations. Now, the war is over and the countryside becomes peaceful, but it is

¹⁶ The Vietnamese Communists refer to the government of South Vietnam as *ngụy* or 'puppet' as it was accused of being controlled by America.

still another world that totally differs from my lifestyle. I don't want to be far from the city.¹⁷

Even so, Hà, convinced by Nghĩa, her boyfriend, agrees to go to work in a remote village in Cà Mau province. The story is well constructed and draws a parallel between its two settings: Saigon and the rural village. The development of Hà and her attitude towards the country folk is connected to her move from bustling Saigon where people, though ambitious, are uncertain and rather pessimistic about the new government, to the quiet village in Cà Mau where the villagers are optimistic and hopeful about the future of the nation.

It is difficult to understand the strong belief of the people here. In the city, I heard people complain a lot and some even swore. Actually, I complained as well. But, those difficulties experienced in city can't be compared to the problems of the people here. These city difficulties are only ten per cent of what people here have to endure here.¹⁸

The longer Hà lives in the village and learns about the trials and sacrifices the poor peasants had to endure during the war, the more she understands and sympathises with the country people. This is in contrast to her boyfriend. At the beginning, Nghĩa is eager to come to the village in the hope that his action would be applauded and he would become a hero overnight. The author emphasises Nghĩa's selfishness and calculating behaviours, in order to idealise the selfless commitment of the village people.

Quỳnh is another interesting character in the story. She represents a number of city people who are good by nature, but naive and ignorant about the reality of the countryside. Quỳnh is very excited about joining the programme as it allows her to experience new adventures and discover the mysterious world of the countryside. However, the ruins and relics from the period of war show her what the countryside had to pay for the price of the war, and soon she begins to understand the reality of the countryside and the misery of its inhabitants.

¹⁷ Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn. *Xa Thành Phố* (Far from the City). Reprinted in *Truyện Ngắn TP Hồ Chí Minh* (A Collection of Ho Chi Minh City's Short Stories). Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Văn Học, 2000. Pp. 307-308.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

Although the short story acts as a political tool for the Socialist construction in the southern part of Vietnam in the post-war period, it gives a clear picture of the feelings of indifference and separation between the city and the country. As shown through the character Quỳnh, the story discloses the deprivation hiding behind the countryside's romantic and adventurous facades. And the characters in the story are urged to realise the fact that they have previously failed to recognise the good nature of the country people.

What Hữu Mai expressed in the 1950s, through the short story *Mất Hết* (Losing all Senses),¹⁹ is not much different from what Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn tried to convey in *Xa Thành Phố* (Far from the City). Hữu Mai portrays the city as a corrupting power that can turn a good person into a bad one. The narrator, a war veteran, describes how his friend is influenced by the enticing but corrupt environment of the city. His friend had also been a soldier and they had fought on the same battlefields. His friend was transferred to work in a military unit in Hanoi and he married a city girl. When the narrator saw his friend again, he was surprised how much his friend had changed, not only in personality but also in the way of thinking. The narrator concluded it was the city and his city-born wife that made his friend lose himself in material and superficial values.

Hữu Mai contrasts the materialistic city with the more spiritual countryside. For instance, the narrator says the moon in the countryside is more beautiful than the moon in Hanoi, where its beauty is obscured by electric lights. In the countryside people live modestly and close to nature, but in the city people are too concerned about materialism. When compared with peasants, Hanoi is upper-class society is seen as useless. It is dissipated and self-indulgent, as is manifested in the character of the narrator's friend's wife. She spends most of her time making herself look nice, going out with friends and reading romances.

¹⁹ It is not clear when the short story was first published, but it can be assumed from the content that it was probably after the resistance against the French troop. It appears in the collection of short stories selected by the Vietnamese Writers' Association. Lê Minh Khuê (ed.). *Tuyển Tập Truyện Ngắn các Tác Giả Đạt Giải Thưởng Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam* (The Collection of Awarded Short stories by Vietnam Writers' Association). Vol. 2. Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1998. Pp. 5-46.

Xa Thành Phố (Far from the City) is another attempt of a literary work to address the tension between the city and countryside in the post-war period. However, written as early as 1977, Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn failed to foresee that the friction between the city and country would not be resolved, especially when capitalist development was more highly emphasised. As the years have passed, the antagonism has become even more intense and uncompromising. *Xa Thành Phố* (Far from the City) is thus a reminder of the sacrifice and contribution of the peasants in the struggle for national liberation. Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn clearly points out that a viable peace is impossible without the efforts and sacrifices of country people, and city people living a more comfortable life should recognise this and try to do something in return. This short story can be regarded as a continuation of the wartime project that favoured the countryside over the city.

The next part of this study will discuss how Ma Văn Kháng's short story, *Quê Nội* (Father's Native Village) [1981], Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short story, *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê* (Remembrance of the Countryside) [1989], and the novel *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) [1986] by Lê Lựu represent the city-country conflict.

4.2.2. *The Ungrateful City*

D.B. Miller once asserted:

The 'peasants' struggle and rebel, but once the visible colonial despots have gone and 'independence' has been 'declared', ultimately their continuing misery and deepening alienation lack focus, for their source, ultimately, is a distant and barely visible enemy in the plush metropolitan centres of a world economy.²⁰

This statement fits in very well with the socio-political context of post-war Vietnam. That is to say, the rural villages that once held political significance as revolutionary bases were soon forsaken, whereas urbanisation and industrialisation have grown incessantly. Therefore, it is not the miseries and poverty of the countryside that are

²⁰ Miller, D.B., 'Peasants, Politics and the Study of Social Change in Asia' in D. B. Miller (ed.). *Peasants and Politics: Grass Roots to Change in Asia*. Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1978. P. 182.

accentuated in the post-war texts, but rather the fear of being forgotten and the anguish of being betrayed.

Let us begin with *Quê Nội* (Father's Native Village) by Ma Văn Kháng. The author tells the story from the viewpoint of a young girl, Thuỷ Tiên. Her father originated from the countryside, but she knew very little about her father's native village because she was born and brought up in the city. Writing through the eyes of a young girl allowed Ma Văn Kháng to show that the city person's knowledge of the countryside would be as naive as that of the immature and inexperienced Thuỷ Tiên, whose preconception of the village is romantic, but superficial:

The cool Southern wind blows the fragrance from the rice field where rice is ripe and waiting for harvest. Yellow moonlight plays along swaying bamboos. The sound of a flute and the howling of the wind can be heard from far away, along with the sound of the waves of the sea. Grandmother will read a fairy tale. She is as calm, kind, and gentle as an angel.²¹

However, Thuỷ Tiên begins to learn about the reality of the countryside from her trip to her father's native village. In a similar way to Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, Ma Văn Kháng allows his characters and readers to learn and realise the true nature of the countryside through a shift of settings, namely from the city to countryside. Thuỷ Tiên did not even have to reach her father's native village because the reality of the countryside revealed itself soon after the train left Hanoi:

After being on the train for a while, the excitement disappears. Harvested ricefields along the railways look empty. Small towns glimmer. Canals are muddy red and silent...The longer the train goes, the more boring everything gets.²²

The author's comparison between the city and countryside is divided into different levels. First, the city and countryside are contrasted by their superficial appearance: the lively city and the boring countryside. Young and ignorant as she is, Thuỷ Tiên

²¹ Ma Văn Kháng *Quê Nội* (Father's Native Village). Reprinted in *Ngày Đẹp Trời: Tập Truyện Ngắn* (Beautiful Day: A Collection of Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Lao Động, 1986. P. 71.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

sees the difference of the two locales only from their surfaces. Then, the author tries to correct the young girl's impression of the countryside, which is '*monotonous, tedious and old-fashioned in its rhythm, without soul*'. In order to understand the real countryside, he believed, Thuỷ Tiên should look at its deeper layer, not only its surface. As he puts it:

Thuỷ Tiên never understands and probably cannot understand the village, including its simple life style, deprivation and poverty. She has not yet learned about the diversity of life with different classes, frankness, high spirit, generosity and colourful features of its language. It also includes profound and brave characteristics. It is like the diversity of several musical pieces put into a symphony of life.²³

Ma Văn Kháng also revealed that the city and countryside in the post-war period were drifting apart from each other. Whilst the countryside was still unable to shake off the past, the city was moving towards the future. Country people remained preoccupied by the memory of war. It gave them a sense of pride in what they had contributed to the liberation of the nation. However, at the same time, the ruins left behind kept reminding them of the price the peasants had to pay for victory. In the meantime, the war began to fade from the memory of the city people, and it seemed that they would like to move towards the future as soon as possible rather than to think about the past. The city's viewpoint about the past is represented through the character Thuỷ Tiên, who showed no interest and was even annoyed when children in the village proudly talked about the heroic deeds of their parents during wartime.

As for Thuỷ Tiên's father, he lost touch with his roots. He became urbanised and clearly did not want to have any contact with the village. The reason he came back to his village was not to visit his old mother or Thía, his older daughter born with a village woman, but to get back the golden ring he gave his former wife on their wedding day. Here, the ring can be seen as symbolising the final fragile link between the city and countryside. Once the ring was returned to him, he would never again go back to the village. The link between the rural and the urban would be finally severed. Another episode making this point is the scene when grandma and Thía see Thuỷ Tiên and her father off at the railway station. Grandma and Thía are crying, whereas Thuỷ

²³ Ibid., p. 88.

Tiên and her father are indifferent about the farewell. In fact, they are happy to leave the countryside and looking forward to getting back to the city. As is hinted at the end of the story, they will never come back to the village again. The village is thus a place to be left behind and abandoned.

A similar theme is expressed in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short story *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê* (Remembrance of the Countryside), through the portrayal of two characters Nhâm, a peasant boy and Quyên, a city girl who has just returned from studying in America. After having received news that Quyên will come to visit the countryside, her aunt asks Nhâm to meet Quyên at the train station. Quyên's perception of Nhâm reflects the city view that the countryside is something to be hired and forgotten. Quyên never imagined that Nhâm came to pick her up because of his intention to do her aunt a favour. She thought that he did it because of money.

She (Quyên) walks through the ticket gate and looks around. She recognises me immediately. 'I'm Quyên,' she says. 'Did aunt Lưu send you to pick me up?'

'Yes,' I say.

Quyên smiles. 'Thank you. How are you related to aunt Lưu? What's your name?'

'I'm Nhâm. I'm the son of Hùng.'

'Do we share any common ancestors?'

'No.'

Quyên nods. 'Good. Aunt Lưu hired you then?'²⁴

Through the relationship between Quyên and Nhâm, the author tries to symbolise the ambivalence about the city and the country. In the countryside, the scenery is beautiful and people are kind-hearted and ready to help each other, but it is rustic and dull. At first, it seems mysterious and interesting to a city person like Quyên, but then she becomes bored and soon abandons her plan to 'have an accurate impression of the countryside'. As she says, 'I've only been here three days, but it seems so long!'. Nhâm, however, is impressed by Quyên's modern appearance, although disappointed

²⁴ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. *Remembrance of the Countryside*. Translated by Dana Sachs and Nguyen Van Khang. In *Vietnam: A Traveller's Literary Companion*. San Francisco: Whereabouts Press, 1996. Pp. 158-159.

by the fact that she keeps forgetting his name, even though he keeps her company and shows her around the village during her three-day stay. When Nhâm says, '*my countryside is anonymous*', he reflects the fact that the country is offended by the fact that their contribution is not appropriately acknowledged.

The theme of the ungrateful city is strongly emphasised in the novel, *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) [1986] by Lê Lưu. It is shown through the relationship between Giang Minh Sài and Châu how the countryside is exploited and betrayed by the city. Sài was born and brought up in a peasant family. In order to achieve a better life, he tries to pursue his education despite financial difficulty. But his parents arranged for him to marry Tuyết, a peasant girl. To get away from his wife, whom he does not love, he decides to interrupt his study and join the army. After the war ends, he finds a reason to divorce Tuyết and works in a government office in Hanoi where he meets and marries Châu, a city girl. The author's criticism of city dwellers starts from here.

Châu is characterised as loose and cunning. She tricks Sài into marrying her in order to cover up the fact that she had an affair with a married man and had become pregnant by him. She is also portrayed as a wicked woman who is cold and unkind to her husband. For example, she makes him do all house chores. The excerpt below shows how Sài changed after his marriage to Châu:

The days wore on Sài-there had been 300 of them since his wedding and 196 days since the birth of his child. In that time, Sài had lost nearly twelve kilos and had aged more than ten years. He looked haggard and unkempt, like a cyclo driver working the graveyard shift at the train station.²⁵

Lê Lưu makes it clear that Châu does not love or have any feelings for Sài. She marries him because she believes that he will not be clever enough to find out that she is pregnant by another man, and then cause any trouble for her after the marriage. The contrast between Giang Minh Sài and Châu reflects the different characteristics of city and country people:

²⁵ Lê Lưu. *A Time Far Past*. Translated by Ngo Vinh Hai, Nguyen Ba Chung, Kewin Bowen and David Hunt. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. P. 204.

...he (Sài) knew, the family (of Châu) and others were taken with him because he was honest - a hardworking and artless man. True, he was clever in some ways, but it was the cleverness of a peasant, not that of a charlatan. People loved him because he was naive and simple, while his wife was shrewd and experienced.²⁶

Châu never shows any respect or appreciation for what Sài does for her. In their argument, his peasant background became a point that she picks up and disdains:

‘Listen, listen, don’t act jealous, talking like a peasant.’

Sài felt his knees weaken. He said, ‘I am not jealous yet.’

‘Don’t use those bullying tactics against me the way you did so well against those peasant girls.’

‘How can the ‘country’ bully the ‘city’? What the ‘country’ says needs to be based on material evidence, not groundless charges. It’s just a matter of whether it’s time to say it.’²⁷

Their conflict becomes more intense after Châu gives birth to a second child. The baby is not healthy, and Châu and her family blame this on the fact that Sài had been infected with malaria while fighting at Trường Sơn mountain. Driven by anger and frustration, Sài expresses his resentment as follow:

He (Sài) imagined he’d bang on their (Châu’s family) door and shout, ‘If it weren’t for those malaria-men, lugging bombs and bullets on the battlefields for all those years, you wouldn’t be able to indulge in your extravagant debauchery, grafting yourself onto government agencies so that you can steal and collect your salaries, so you can make connections and cut steady deals and take bribes. TVs, refrigerators and sofas to fill your houses, and still you open your mouths, yapping indignantly about the ills, the poverty, the difficult conditions of society... Châu had once cornered him, ‘Listen, if you can exchange your bravery for a bundle of string spinach without having to stand

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

in line, you should be happy. Don't be so proud of those empty, high-sounding words. Otherwise one day you'll starve!' ²⁸

As is shown in the passage cited above, Lê Lựu's criticism of city people is severe. Not only does he portray them as selfish and ungrateful to peasants but he also accuses them of being disloyal to Socialism, the ideology emphasised during the revolutionary period and the war campaign. Through the novel, the author criticises city people for losing faith in Socialism and lacking a social consciousness. For example, Châu's family and friends are busy making money. In contrast, people in the countryside remain faithful to the Socialist ideology. The narrator describes the difference between people in the city and countryside as follows:

If one stayed only in the city, seeing and hearing of the rich and famous, the gangsters and the thieves, one would think that the end of Socialism was near. Back in the country, the mind was immediately set at ease. There one could find faith in Socialism, the feeling that it would make solid advances, despite serious challenges. These peasants, how kind-hearted and hard-working they were! They would do whatever they were told, eat whatever was provided, wear whatever was available, bear whatever was inflicted and perform whatever formidable tasks were assigned. ²⁹

The excerpt above seems to imply Lê Lựu's strong faith in Socialism. It is difficult to conclude whether or not this is a genuine message or a convenient way to avoid trouble with the censors. The novel was written before the Renovation period, when almost the entire nation was pessimistic about the future of Socialist development. Lê Lựu's optimistic view here, therefore, is in contrast to the mood of the public. However, the Party line was still very strict by the time the plan of economic and political renovation was declared.

At the end of the story, Sài's decision to go back to the village and work for a collective farm and to get a divorce from Châu shows the failure to harmonise the city with the countryside, and the hospitality between the city and the countryside is still unsolved.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.241.

4.2.3. *The Defeat of the Countryside*

The short story *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest Who Lives Far Away) is one of the most successful literary pieces of the post-1975 period. It was written by Nguyễn Minh Châu in 1984, two years before Lê Lựu's famous novel, *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past) was introduced to the public. Its author openly criticises the malfunctioning of the Socialist economic model and foresees the decline of rural communities and the rise of the city.

The short story *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest Who Lives Far Away) opens by examining the estrangement of the city and the countryside through the relationship between Khúng, a peasant from the central region of Vietnam, and his wife, Huệ, who is from the city. The pregnant Huệ is upset about her love life. She decides to leave the city in order to live in the countryside. While she is about to give birth in a deserted area, Khúng comes by and helps her. He gives her and the baby food and shelter. Huệ agrees to marry Khúng on the condition that he will never ask about her past and the father of her son. Khúng accepts this because he wants to have a wife from the city. However, she is never happy living in the countryside, as it was a closed community isolated from the world outside:

All the time she has lived here (the countryside), Huệ is hoping for the emergence of the city, not the city for commercialising and consumption, but an industrialised city with thousands of workers exploiting minerals and metals. Huệ knows that the relationship between human beings and nature will be totally different from the present time. Life cannot be covered up any longer, and right at where they are, they will be able to receive news from other places...Alas, only Huệ can understand all the sufferings and pressure of being hidden and excommunicated from the surroundings. Even a very intelligent and knowledgeable person can be turned into a stupid one.³⁰

³⁰ Nguyễn Minh Châu. *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest who Lives Far Away). Reprinted in Tuyển Tập Truyện Ngắn (Collection of Nguyễn Minh Châu's Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1999. P. 572-573.

Nguyễn Minh Châu did not see the countryside as innocent and helpless like some of his contemporaries. He portrays it, instead, as having the power to turn an intellectual person into a stupid one. The village's secluded atmosphere and conservatism would, as Nguyễn Minh Châu clearly points out, prevent it from achieving any kind of development and change. As the narrator of *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest Who Lives Far Away) emphasises:

His village is called Khoi. It is situated between rice field and sea. After getting off the train, you need to walk along a small path beside the beach for about ten kilometres. The countryside has strong power to swallow people. The power of the countryside can grind people into powder and then put them into its own mould that has been used for thousands of years. Then, the countryside will force these people to live and follow its law, which is never written down.³¹

The difference between the city and the country is irreconcilable, as a demonstrated through the estrangement of Khúng and Huệ, who never feel close to each other even after they have been married for twenty years and have seven children together. Alienation also developed between Khúng and his uncle, Định. Supported by Khúng's parents, Định has the chance to pursue a higher education and get a job in Hanoi. Although he begins to lose touch with his origins because of his long stay in the city, he is still grateful to Khúng's parents and this is why he is often obliged to yield to Khúng's requests. However, there is almost nothing to link Khúng and Định's city-born children, even though they are relatives. As Nguyễn Minh Châu comments, it is like *người từ hai thế giới hợp lại* (the meeting of people from two different worlds) when Khúng visits Định's family. As Oswald Spengler comments on the disparity between rural and urban people:

The man of the land and the man of the city are different essences. First of all they feel the difference, then they are dominated by it, and at last they cease to understand each other at all.³²

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

³² Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West: Perspectives of World History*. Volume 2. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1928 (?). P. 91.

For a country dweller, to enter the city is to enter a different world, which he or she would find exciting but also complex, like a maze or labyrinth. As Walter Benjamin asserts, '*fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big city crowd aroused in those who first observed it.*'³³ This is what Nguyễn Minh Châu describes when Khúng first encounters a crowd of strangers in the streets of Hanoi. For Khúng, the city is not only different from his native village, but it is also unknown to him. Raymond Williams defines the city as '*unknowable community*' because in the city there is an absence of those '*directly extending links of family and neighbourhood*', which characterise the countryside or a *knowable community*.³⁴

With its complex and labyrinthine structure, the city turns into a maze for an outsider like Khúng. He is lost not only on the streets, which were bustling with strangers and vehicles, but also in a block of flats. It takes him hours to look for his wife's former lover's address which Khúng secretly found on the envelopes of letters sent to his wife. When arriving at the place, he discovers that Dũng, the eldest child of Huệ who he had brought up and loved like his own son, is there with his real father. In a state of shock, Khúng runs away from the building and then gets lost in the busy streets of Hanoi. Wandering from one street to another, he is unable to find a way back to his uncle Định's house until his uncle comes to find him. Khúng makes an immediate decision to go back to the countryside that same night. On the journey, he experiences the feeling of fear and loneliness. This is shown in the final part of the short story:

Khúng's body trembled as if he had a fever, and suddenly he felt so lonely. He was murmuring and calling Dũng, and then called the names of his children one by one. He prayed for the children not to leave him and to stay with him, with the soil and land.³⁵

Nguyễn Minh Châu gives us a clear picture of how a rough and tough peasant can be reduced to a state of powerlessness in the threatening, unknown and complex city. The city has the power and attractiveness to lure Khúng's children. Dũng's leaving is just the beginning of the migration of the village people to a more exciting and lively

³³ Quoted in Gilloch, Graeme. *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. P. 140.

³⁴ Williams, Raymond. *Country and City in the Modern Novel*. Swansea: University College of Swansea, 1987.

³⁵ Nguyễn Minh Châu. *Khách ở Quê Ra* (A Guest who Lives Far Away). P. 584.

city. As Nguyễn Minh Châu suggests at the end of the story, this battle would end with the defeat of the countryside.

Khách ở Quê Ra (A Guest Who Lives Far Away) was not just a classic tale about the conflict between two different settings in a Vietnamese context. It responded to the post-war debate as to whether sophisticated urban civilisation or peasant guerrillas should be promoted as the dominant national image. Nguyễn Minh Châu accepted that the countryside and peasant values which were dominant during wartime would inevitably be replaced by urban culture, but he still expressed a sense of disappointment throughout his writing. His story recounts how the peasants exploited the forest and formed a new community, but it is then shown how that new community was invaded by urban expansion.

However, there are some writers who wanted to promote urban civilisation. Thus, it is not a coincidence to see that a number of stories about Hanoi and the revitalisation of city life appear in the post-war period.³⁶ In post-1975 literature, the city begins to appear and become a focus. This was rarely seen during the war, because any writer who paid more attention to the city was likely to be criticised as arrogant, aloof or distant from the masses.

Another interesting aspect of Nguyễn Minh Châu's short story is that he uses the character of a male peasant and an urban woman to illustrate how the countryside was exploited by the city. This is the same method employed in Lê Lựu's novel, discussed earlier in this chapter. The depiction departs from the conventions of stories written in the 1930s as regards its gendered representation of the conflict between town and village. It does not feature an innocent peasant girl who runs away from village to city and ends up being cheated or raped by a city man. On the contrary, in post-1975

³⁶ For example, in the short story *Đất Kinh Kỳ* (The Capital City), Nguyễn Khải idealises Hanoi as a city of literature and a place to inspire writers and poets to create great pieces of work. He also points out that city civilisation is regarded as higher than provincial culture. As he puts it:

The Red River, the wind blowing from the Red River is amazing. It creates the canon of Northern and Hanoi Literatures. You can live and write wherever you want, but only experiencing the fragrance and atmosphere of Hanoi can make true literature, which is different from provincial literature. Well, it is just a feeling and cannot be scientifically explained...Any clever people have to come to Hanoi in order to have an opportunity to be famous. People from the scholar-gentry class and noble families, whether or not they intended to so, have contributed to the development of national knowledge. Their voices, whether or not are officially accepted, expressed the spirituality of the country.

See more in Nguyễn Khải. *Đất Kinh Kỳ* (The Capital City). Reprinted in *Hà Nội Trong Mắt Tôi* (Hanoi in My Eyes). Hanoi: NXB Hà Nội, 1995.

literature, it is an honest, but naive, peasant man who gets tricked by a city woman. There are two possible explanations for this change in characterisation.

The first explanation is the background of the writers. Although the 1930-1945 period was a golden age for stories about peasants and the countryside, most writers of that time were urban-based and wrote from the viewpoint of observers witnessing the deprivation of the peasants. Using a female character as a victim would have provoked more sympathy from readers. Also, the story would be more convincing because women tended to be ideal victims for any kind of exploitation. Most male writers in the post-1975 period, by contrast, came from peasant backgrounds, Lê Lựu and Nguyễn Minh Châu included. Therefore, it can be speculated that the change resulted partly from the fact that these authors were able to share the feelings of loneliness and alienation that their male characters experienced in the city.

The second explanation for the change is that the degree of humiliation endured by male characters would, for male writers, be more severe. For a man, nothing would be more humiliating than having his masculinity stripped away. By focusing on the misery of male peasants, the writers used this issue of gender pride to accentuate the tension between the city and countryside. The issue can also be a metaphor for the countryside's sense of shame induced by the city.

4.2.4. The Village Contested

A number of literary works of the 1990s show concern about the process of industrialisation and urbanisation. Together with the development projects in the countryside, urbanisation brings materialism and consumerism into village life, and this creates a crisis for traditional village values. The literary examples presented in the following paragraphs will give us a clearer picture of the countryside in the late twentieth century under the policy of market economy.

Ma Văn Kháng also reflects his concern about the impact of urban development on village life in his short story, *Ngoại Thành* (The Countryside) [1995]. In the story, Dân decides to take his family to the countryside because he is bored by the crowded and environmentally polluted city. He is disappointed with corrupted people around

him, especially at his workplace. He hopes that the countryside will provide him with a better life. The countryside is idealised as follows:

The countryside, alas, the countryside. It is the area surrounding the territory of the city. The peaceful and sunny morning is a simple present from nature. The countryside is an unknown place, remote jungle, which is still shadowy and the atmosphere is not yet clear. The countryside is the place where time moves slowly. It is a silence. It is a creation of God.³⁷

Dân is not wrong because initially he has a very happy life in the country. His wife and children feel the same. Working in the fruit orchards helps them stay healthy, and Dân is able to concentrate more on translating classical literary works written in Chinese into Vietnamese before sending them to the publishers in the city. However, this happiness does not last long. Urbanisation gradually extends to the area where he lives. Hotels, holiday resorts for foreign tourists, luxurious restaurants and karaoke bars are increasingly built and threateningly intrude into the peaceful countryside.³⁸ Even worse, one of his retired former colleagues invests the money he gets from corruption into building a hotel right next to Dân's land. Finally, Dân and his family decide to move again, but it is doubtful for how long they would be able to escape from the urban growth. There is also a sense that the countryside is exhausted from being chased by industrial development, as Ma Văn Kháng states in the final passage of the story:

The countryside still exists and it will exist forever, but now it is retreating to a far away place as if this were a dark curse of God.³⁹

In her short story, *Đất Xóm Chùa* (The Land of Chùa Hamlet) [1993], Đoàn Lê reveals the problems of the countryside in the era of market economy. The price of land in the Chùa Hamlet dramatically increases due to the building of a motorway near the hamlet. The motorway is a symbol of development as it helps link the village to the

³⁷ Ma Văn Kháng. *Ngoại Thành* (The Countryside). Reprinted in *Tập Truyện Ngắn* (A Collection of Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 2000. P. 106.

³⁸ The threat of rapid change in the countryside found in this short story is merely a prelude to the infamous incident a year later. In December 1996, over a thousand villagers on the outskirts of Hanoi protested against the plan to build a luxury golf court on the land confiscated from peasants. A number of villagers were reported injured during the demonstration. See more in www.fva.org

³⁹ Ma Văn Kháng. *Ngoại Thành* (The Countryside). P. 119.

world outside, and attracts a number of investors to build guesthouses, restaurants, and karaoke bars along the road. Without hesitation, peasants sell their land for high prices. However, they regret their decision because afterwards they do not know what to do for a living. Working in the ricefields almost all their lives, these peasants have no qualifications or skills to pursue other careers.

Nguyễn Thị Văn's short story, *Chuyện Xóm Trầu* ('The Story of Trầu Hamlet') [1997] has a similar theme. Peasants in Trầu Hamlet are described as cheerful, generous and poetic. When free from work in the field, they like making poems or just a few lines of verse to tease each other. However, these characteristics disappear after a soft drink factory is built there by investors from Hong Kong. This causes environmental changes and pollution in the village. Whether they like it or not, peasants have to yield to the industrial development and sell their land to foreign investors. Finally, the peasants end up being unemployed and packed into a small area next to the factory, which the author calls *khu ổ chuột mới* (a new slum). Nobody in the village now thinks of composing a poem, for they have become quite without hope.

Similarly, Nguyễn Hữu Nhân's short stories of the late 1990s mainly reflect the change in values and behaviour of the country people because of the influence of materialism and consumerism. Industrial development and the influx of new products make people selfish and greedy. For instance, the short story *Chuyện Họ Chuyện Làng* (The Story of Family and Village) [1999] describes how an increase in the price of land causes a conflict among family members. People become greedier and will do anything for money. Nguyễn Hữu Nhân is concerned that this will destroy the friendly relationships of people in the village. In the short story, *Phố Làng* (Village Road) [1999], the picture of an old man holding a mobile phone whilst tending buffalo that walked along the new concrete street strewn with Coca Cola cans and beer bottles tells us a great deal about the influx of consumer goods into the village. Another story published in the same collection, *Anh Ngự* (Mr. Ngự) also reveals how the growth of urbanisation and industrialisation caused separation in the village, widening the gap between rich and poor.⁴⁰ People tried to get rich and they would not hesitate to exploit other people if they had a chance.

⁴⁰ See more in Nguyen Sinh, 'The Rich and the poor in Vietnam's Countryside Today' and Nguyen Dang Tuat, 'Wealth Differentiation among the Peasants of the Mekong Delta' in *The Traditional Village in Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993. Pp. 444-458.

Another interesting short story is *Mộ Tổ* (Ancestral Grave) [1997] by Dương Duy Ngũ. The author exemplifies the decline of the village community and traditional values with the change in building ancestral graves. In the past, graves tended to be small because peasants wanted to save land for growing rice. Peasants visited the grave of their forefathers occasionally in order to show gratitude and pay their respects. In some cases, they would pray and ask the souls of their ancestors to help them gain a prosperous life and protect them from bad luck. In the market economy period, peasants tended to build bigger and more luxurious ancestral graves, as symbols of family wealth and honour, as indicated in the following excerpt:

Because of the resolution number 10 and open-door policy, the standard of living in the village is better. After building a house and water reservoir for themselves, people started thinking of gratitude to their ancestors. The villagers competed with each other for constructing the most beautiful ancestral house. The rich boastfully vowed that they would make a really big and beautiful ancestral house.⁴¹

— Lila Ngô Tít Tít

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The author criticises this behaviour as superficial and irrational. Some families could afford to build a big ancestral house. For example, some members of the Nguyễn Đông family had to borrow money from the bank to contribute to the construction of their ancestral grave. In the end, their land and property were confiscated because they were unable to pay back the loan. Moreover, the grave intruded onto the land of another family. This caused a conflict with the neighbours and the expensive ancestral grave had to be demolished. Peasants began to forget that an ancestral grave was traditionally a place for showing respect to ancestors and maintaining the link between people from the same extended family, not a means to show off wealth and social status.

4.2.5. The City as a Cause of Moral Decline

Criticism of the city as corrupt and immoral is in fact one of the main themes in Vietnamese literature. The city is portrayed as threatening to traditional values and

⁴¹ Dương Duy Ngũ. *Mộ Tổ* (Ancestral Grave). Reprinted in *Truyện Ngắn Chọn Lọc* (Selected Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 2001. P. 394.

morality. It is often viewed as a cause of moral decline. As Vũ Trọng Phụng states in *Cơm Thầy Cơm Cô* (Household Servants) [1936]:

The city lures people from the countryside who leave dry fields and dead grass, and who starve a second time after they have abandoned their homes. It reduces people to the level of animals; it often drives young men into prison and young women into prostitution!⁴²

The late well-known scholar Nguyễn Khắc Viện once wrote of his concern about the development of Ho Chi Minh City as follows:

Is the city to become a parasitic metropolis, a consumer society, a colossal leech that will suck up the nation's wealth for its orgies and revelries, or is it to become an industrial, scientific, cultural and international relations centre for the whole of the Mekong delta, a pole of development whose activity will benefit the whole country?⁴³

The perception of the city did not change much in late twentieth century Vietnam. As reflected in the literature, the city was still criticised for luring and entrapping people into corruption and immorality. It is a place that breeds social problems such as drugs and prostitution.⁴⁴ The short story *Đời Nhà lên Phố* (Move to the City) [1992] by Nguyễn Quốc Trung is also constructed around this idea.

The story is a reflection of the situation in the 1990s, when the process of urbanisation expanded rapidly throughout the country. Many peasant families had to give up their land. The rice fields were turned into hotels, holiday resorts and tennis courts to serve foreign tourists. Peasants had to move to other areas or migrate to the city after selling their land. The narrator describes how it is painful for peasants to leave their land and

⁴² Lockhart, Greg and Monique Lockhart. *The Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*. P. 130.

⁴³ Cited in Thrift, Nigel and Dean Forbes. *The Price of wars: Urbanisation in Vietnam 1954-1985*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1986. P. 129.

⁴⁴ Askew and Logan note that Vietnam began to implement capitalist economic ideas much later than other countries in South East Asia, but its rush to improve the economic situation and to transform the country has caused the same problems, like child labour and prostitution, faced by other cities, such as Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta. See more in Askew, Marc and William S. Logan (eds.). *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in Southeast Asia: Interpretative Essays*. Deakin University Press: Victoria, 1994. Pp. 1-12.

ancestors' tombs. Land is very important to a Vietnamese because it '*means far more than a means of livelihood; it enables him to venerate his ancestors by maintaining their tombs in the corner of the paddy, and it assures him that his descendants will be able to provide similarly for his veneration. Ownership of the land takes care of the past, present, and future of the peasants.*'⁴⁵ Thus, as is emphasised in this short story, the future of peasants will not be promising after the land is sold.

Like other villagers, Mr. Năm Thạch and his family have to sell their land to investors and move to the city with the hope that they will have a better life there. Many Vietnamese believe that living in the city is preferable, as shown in this proverb: *giàu nhà quê không bằng ngồi lê vĩa hè thành thị* (the rich in the countryside are not as good as those sitting and gossiping on the street of the city). Nguyễn Quốc Trung used the case of Mr. Năm Thạch to question this popular belief and to disclose the dark side of the city.

The author describes how the happy peasant family is destroyed due to their association with the city. They become morally corrupted, selfish and greedy. Madame Năm Thạch opens a coffee shop, but she also puts heroin into the coffee so that clients would be addicted to her coffee. She is not a bad person by nature, but it is the influence of the city that turns a gentle peasant woman into a calculating merchant. As her husband is cheated of all the savings they had from selling the land, she begins to be pessimistic about life. If other people took away her money without any mercy, she asks why should she not do the same? And this is the beginning of disaster for her family. The elder son becomes addicted to drugs, the younger one leaves home, and her husband is imprisoned in an attempt to save her from the charge of possessing heroin. Finally, she too is arrested for smuggling goods.

A similar theme is highlighted in Phan Đình Minh's short story, *Ra Phố* (Go to the City) [1999], which reflects the economic inequality between the city and countryside in the late 1990s. Peasants had to migrate to look for jobs in the city after the harvest season. For Phúc and his fellow villagers, going to the city not only means extra income for their families but also an adventure they might later tell their children and grandchildren about. They would be more clever and know more about the world after

⁴⁵ Andrews, William R. *The Village War*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973. P. 6.

visiting the city. This reflects the perception of peasants, in general, that the city is a better place to live. Phan Đình Minh's story about Phúc's journey to the city shows that this is not necessarily true.

Phúc is hired as a helper for Gió, a rich widow. She chooses Phúc to work for her, and later falls in love with him because of his honesty, a quality she cannot find in city people. Through the construction of these two characters, the contrast between the city and countryside is drawn. Phúc represents the countryside, which is materialistically poor but happy, whereas Gió embodies the characteristics of people in the city who are rich, but lonely and unhappy.

This story also illustrates the difference between the social structure of the countryside and that of the city; between collective and individualistic communities. Phúc is unable to accept Gió's offer that they should live together as a couple while he is still obligated to support his wife and children at home. He turns down the proposal and goes back to his family. This should not be seen as a surprise, because he comes from the village society where the sense of family and community is paramount. As for Gió, she feels isolated in the individualised community where she cannot trust anybody.⁴⁶ She is amused by Phúc's peasant qualities, namely straightforward and honest, and calls him Lão Hạc, the famous peasant character in Nam Cao's short story. She falls for him because he is a man that she can trust, and his presence helps reduce her sense of loneliness. Gió is not concerned with whether or not he already has a family and tries to seduce him. But for Phúc, the consolidation of family is his ultimate value. He finally manages to resist the temptation of the city and goes back to his family in the countryside.

4.2.6. The Nostalgia of the Past

⁴⁶ On this subject, the late prominent Vietnamese scholar, Nguyễn Khắc Viện supported Marx and Engels' idea that the collective character of village community would be destroyed when towns and markets grew. In the case of the Vietnamese village, he explained that peasants shared the same struggle against national calamities. For example, they had to build dykes, canals and reservoirs together. Moreover, the village was an independent administrative unit under the control of the royal administration. In each village, peasants had to agree among themselves how to meet the requirements of the central government, such as tax payment and military service. Thus, the communal spirit became a vital character of Vietnamese villages. See more in *Vietnam*'78. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978. Pp. 16-17.

It is also shown in the post-1975 literature that the countryside is nostalgically depicted through memories of childhood. It is not only individual reminiscences, but also the collective memory of the Vietnamese past that is reflected in the post-war Vietnamese literature, written through the period of economic transformation. For instance, in the short story *Làng Ơi* (Oh Village)⁴⁷ by Khôi Nguyên, the narrator describes his visit to his native village which was for him the *thăm cội nguồn* (the return to the roots). The author draws a parallel between the present village and the village that the narrator recalled from his childhood, or even the village he tried to preserve.

The story opens with the narrator's visit to his native village, which in his memory is a naturally beautiful place, where he hopes to see friendly relatives and neighbours. Then, it reveals the narrator's astonishment at the extent of the changes that has occurred in the village. The village gate, which once symbolised the pride of the village people, has been demolished to enable a new road to be constructed through the village. This is the gate through which troops had once passed. Historical stories about the village were inscribed on its stone posts. The narrator emphasises the importance of the gate as a record of the collective memory and a symbol of the village's place in Vietnamese history. Thus, the removal of the gate has severed the village from the past.

It is even more disappointing for the narrator to discover that the relationships among village people have also changed. There is no longer a closely connected community. The young generation have been enticed by materialistic values and consumerism. This short story observes the changes in a village moving towards modernity and losing the traditional customs and scenes that coloured the narrator's childhood memories.

The theme of nostalgia for the past contrasted with the ongoing industrial development is highlighted in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories written in the late 1980s, notably *Chăn Trâu Cắt Cỏ* (Tending Buffaloes and Cutting Grass). The character of the countryside depicted by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is complex. On the one

⁴⁷ It is not clear when the short story was published. As it was put in the collection of short stories written by young writers during 1994-1998. Therefore, it is assumed that it was first published during this period.

hand, the countryside is poeticised and idealised as synonymous with tradition, cultural homogeneity and a link to the past, but on the other hand, it is described as a compound of poverty, boredom and growing consumerism.⁴⁸

In *Chăn Trâu Cắt Cỏ* (Tending Buffaloes and Cutting Grass), village life is described as peaceful and friendly. The peasants, schoolteachers and Buddhist monks live together in harmony. The peasants' daily activities are working in the ricefields, ploughing or tending buffaloes, but they also gather and celebrate village festivals together. The legends about the village are still retold and passed on. Seemingly, it is like the atmosphere of a village in the old days. However, small details inserted in the story show that there are changes occurring in the village. For instance, village people now have to pay for electricity. This is a sign of development in the countryside, but at the same time it becomes a luxurious thing and a burden for some peasants. For example, Nặng's mother has to sell chickens in order to have enough money to pay the bill.

With the open-door policy of the late 1980s, the village can no longer confine itself behind the bamboo hedge, and it is exposed to the outside world and the advent of consumerism. Three men from the city arrange to have a picnic in the village. One of them admits that he has become addicted to Coca Cola. The influx of foreign goods and culture makes people more aware of their own identity, as reflected in the thinking of Nặng, a seventeen-year-old boy:

Nặng looks up to the sky. Nặng does not know where he is. A buffalo is patiently and peacefully gnawing at grass near by. What is it thinking? Where is it? The dark shadow expands all over the rice field. Only wind blows. Obviously, the wind blows. The sound of birds flapping their wings is clearly heard.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ According to Greg Lockhart, the influx of consumerism in the late 1980s implies two things: 'first highlight the government's own ineffective economic performance; and second, set up new expectations that are not only based on individual consumer differences, but also impossible to satisfy with worn-out political slogans based on tradition and history.' in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. *The General Retires and Other Stories*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992. P. 26.

⁴⁹ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. *Chăn Trâu Cắt Cỏ* (Tending Buffaloes and Cutting Grass). Published in *Như Những Ngọn Gió* (Like Several Winds: A Collection of Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1998. P. 532.

Here, we can see that it was difficult for Nặng to locate where he actually was. This is because the industrial growth in post-war Vietnam has brought into question of individual and national collective identities. In the process of development, cultural boundaries between Vietnam and other places are getting blurred. Through this short story, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp thus shows his concern about the loss of village culture. When Nặng is pondering about well-known industrial cities such as New York or Tokyo, this reflects his fear that Vietnamese village tradition will disappear and in the future will not be different from those big metropolises:

In the morning, Nặng gets up, and then cuts the grass for buffaloes. He also brings along a sickle with a couple of rattans. Along the river, there are the fields of corn and sugar cane. Nặng does not really know whether or not the scenery here is beautiful. He is wondering what people in Hanoi, New York, and Tokyo are doing now. Nặng feels as if he had been in those places before, even had learned by heart how to go from one street to another street of those cities.⁵⁰

Nặng's attitude towards things around him appears to be indifferent or even passive, but deep down he is observing and contemplating these new changes. In actual fact, he is perplexed by the transformation of the countryside. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp gives us a disconnected picture of the countryside in which the serenity and village traditions are disrupted by economic growth. In the middle of the development, Nặng, and probably other peasants, are lost and suspicious about their own future and that of the community.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not criticise the new development in the countryside. It seems he accepts that it was inevitable, irresistible, but still he finds it distressing. While the sense of attachment is obviously shown in *Làng Ơi* (Oh Village) by Khôi Nguyên, the voice of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp in *Chăn Trâu Cắt Cỏ* (Tending Buffaloes and Cutting Grass) is like that of a detached observer. The use of this method is even more evident in his other two short stories about the life in the countryside, *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê* (Remembrance of the Countryside) [1989] and *Những Bài Học Nông Thôn* (Lessons from the Country) [1989]. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's narrator's voice sounds cold, cynical and unmoved by

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 524.

the plight of peasants and the deterioration in the countryside. However, this is not the true voice of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. Underlying the indifferent voice and insensitive detail, he has sympathy for peasants and he worries about the changes in the countryside.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's favourite means of showing that the village is threatened by the industrialisation and capitalist development is to juxtapose two pictures of the countryside. One is the traditional countryside with unhurried lifestyle, and the other is the pressure and stream of change from the outside. The conversation in *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê* (Remembrance of the Countryside) reveals how peasants are struggling for economic ends:

I lead Quyên past the auxiliary crops. She asks, 'How much has the local price for agricultural products changed this year?'

'It's gone up 0.4 percent,' I tell her.

'That'll kill you! Industrial products rose 2.2 percent,' she says. 'What's the price of fertilizer?'

'Nitrogen increased 1.6 percent. Phosphorus increased 1.4 percent.'

'Do you use electricity here?' she asks.

'No.'

'The price of electricity rose 2.2 percent.'⁵¹

However, the arrival of electricity causes the death of two young girls. They are hit by the truck carrying electric posts. This shows that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is doubtful about the modernisation of the village. He is not certain or is even pessimistic about the result of the development in the countryside, and whether or not it can bring a better life to peasants. Raymond Williams once warned that it was a mistake when a writer uses the idealisation of the countryside as a critique of industrialisation. This is because the result will be the misrepresentation of the actual reality of rural society.⁵² However, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp never romanticises the countryside although he is conscious about the effects of the urban and industrial development. As he spent most

⁵¹ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê*. (Remembrance of the Countryside). Translated by Dana Sachs and Nguyen Van Khang. *Vietnam: A Traveller's Literary Companion*. San Francisco: Whereabouts Press, 1996. Pp. 170-171.

⁵² Williams, Raymond, 'Literature and Rural Society' in Higgins, John (ed.). *The Raymond Williams Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. P. 118.

of his youth in the rural area of the North-West region, and his mother was an agricultural labourer, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's childhood memory of the countryside would not be merely a romantic one. This has a great influence on the depiction of the countryside in his short stories. For him, the countryside is the place of hard labour, poverty, and boredom with unpromising changes by the forces of industrialisation and capitalism.

It can be said that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's depiction of the countryside is presented as a two-layered picture. On the surface, it looks tranquil and immobile, but underneath it is fast moving and vigorous. In the countryside, people value morality, but not all of them can live up to their moral standards. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp often mentions adultery, sexual desire, greed and betrayal in his writing about the countryside. It is a mixture of honesty and hypocrisy, of the reality and fantasy that rule his attitude towards the countryside. Nevertheless, his compassion for the countryside and his criticism of the city, despite crude reality and indifferent tone, is never absent from his works. As is seen in the words of Triệu, a schoolteacher, in *Những Bài Học Nông Thôn* (Lessons from the Country):

All city people and the educated elite carry a heavy burden of guilt when it comes to the villages. We crush them with our material demands. With our pork stew of science and education, we have a conception of civilisation and an administrative superstructure that is designed to squeeze the villages...⁵³

Another writer who denies the romanticism of the countryside is Nguyễn Khải. Through the perspective of a mature and experienced writer, he expresses the view that the childhood memory of a peaceful and moral village community is a false reflection of social reality. In the story *Một Thời Gió Bụi* (A Hard Time) [1991]⁵⁴, Tú, a city journalist, applies for early retirement because he is fed up with the power struggle and demoralisation at his workplace. At home, he is not happy to have to listen to his wife and children talking about how to make more money. Tú then plans to enjoy his retirement in his home village. This is his memory of country life:

⁵³ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. *Những Bài Học Nông Thôn* (Lessons from the Country). Translated by Greg Lockhart. *The General Retires and Other Stories*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992. P. 174.

⁵⁴ The story received a literary prize for literature about Hanoi.

In the city, especially in the capital, people are eager for power and money, which are the sources of corruption...To go back to the countryside is like returning to the virtues of the nation: fidelity, righteousness and friendliness of the village community where people are always ready to help each other, just like in the old days.⁵⁵

However, Tú becomes disillusioned after living in the village for a few days. Tú's childhood memory is replaced by his observation and experience of village life in the present. Like people in the city, the villagers are striving for a better life, which means to have more money and have more modern conveniences. Collective consciousness, which used to be a major character of village community, is neglected. When Tú expresses his disappointment about the changes in the village, Đồi, his relative, argues:

Only in the city where people are wealthy and civilised, can you talk about morality. In the countryside, we spend most of our time fighting against hunger and poverty. Money is more important.⁵⁶

After hearing about a case of a man killing his old relative for money, Tú decides to return to Hanoi. Tú then has no objection when his family plans to run a noodle soup shop, and volunteers to be a waiter. This is an ironic ending for a war veteran and retired journalist, who fails to recover his lost childhood and finally has to return to reality. The value of *Một Thời Gió Bụi* (A Hard Time) resides in its author's ability to mock at his character, and probably at himself too. Like the protagonist in the story, Nguyễn Khải, a war veteran, journalist and writer, must be disappointed with post-war moral decline and capitalist growth. As the narrator describes, Tú's hope to return to his childhood memory of peaceful life in the countryside is impossible because of changes in rural society. In order to survive in the new society, it is not only Tú who has to give up his social consciousness and moral concerns, and work as a waiter for his family's noodle soup shop, similarly an revolutionary writer like Nguyễn Khải also has to be realistic and adapt to post-war life.

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Khải. *Một Thời Gió Bụi* (A Hard Time). Published in *Truyện Ngắn Chọn Lọc* (Collected Short Stories). Hanoi: NXB Hà Nội, 1994. Pp. 196-197.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

In summary, the representations of the countryside and of the city in Vietnamese literature are closely related to the various authors' experiences as well as to their standpoints regarding socio-political developments. The evolution of this theme in post-1975 literature can be divided into two stages. At first, there was a period of continuity with the wartime literature, which tended to value the country over the city. However, in the late 1980s, writers began to shift their interest to economic development and industrial growth under the market economy policy. In the meantime, the search for origin and identity in the countryside had begun amid the contestation of the village traditions against the influx of consumerism and new values.

Chapter 5: The Memory of the Land Reform

The land reform programme of the 1950s was one of the most traumatic episodes in Vietnamese history¹, and is consequently one that some Vietnamese want to forget. Not only does it bring back the errors the Party policy's in the countryside but it also had a deep and damaging impact on many of individuals involved. Although the land reform programme has been widely studied by Western scholars and referred to in Western Language materials, it is rarely discussed in Vietnamese language sources. In Vietnam, this subject was suppressed and silenced, and only in recent years has that silence began to be broken due to the Renovation policy that allows more freedom of expression. Even now, the tragedy of the land reform programme is told mainly through literature rather than in works of history or politics. This chapter is not an attempt to write a complete account of the land reform, but rather it tries to explore how this tragic episode is recorded and memorised in the post-war literature.

5.1. The Land Reform and the Writing of Vietnamese History

The land reform programme was for long a taboo topic for political discussion in Vietnam. It also seems that most Vietnamese historians have tried to blot out this tragic event from their national history. In Vietnam, most historical texts dealing with this period tend to be brief and obscure. Some historians have even tried to avoid mentioning the losses and disastrous results of the campaign. For example, Bùi Đình Thanh briefly mentions that the failure of the land reform programme was caused by the errors in the following respects: *trấn áp địch* (cracking down enemies), *chỉnh đốn tổ chức* (revamping organisations) and *quy định thành phần giai cấp ở nông thôn* (regulating criteria for the differences of classes in the countryside). Then, he quickly moves on to emphasise the advantages of the programme. Overall, his account of the programme takes up only three pages.² Nguyễn Khắc Viện, a well-known Vietnamese scholar, summarises the issue in only one paragraph in his renowned book, *The Long Resistance* (1858-1975) in which he merely mentions when the programme started and ended, with no further details or reference to the mistakes.³

¹ For historical background of the land reform, see Chapter 1.

² Bùi Đình Thanh. *20 Năm Nước Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng Hoà* (20 Years of The Democratic Republic of Vietnam). Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học, 1966. Pp. 106-108.

³ Nguyễn Khắc Viện. *The Long Resistance* (1858-1975). Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1978. P. 176.

In the atmosphere of greater freedom that has prevailed since the late 1980s, some Vietnamese historians now write more openly about the land reform campaign and refer to the mistakes that caused misfortune and death to many peasants. However, it seems that most Vietnamese historians are still reluctant to go into details about the errors or to discuss the causes and effects of the campaign's failure. In fact many historians not only avoid mentioning the negative effects of the land reform programme, but instead choose to focus on describing how well and promptly the government realised its mistakes and then launched another campaign called the '*rectification of errors*' to solve the problems.⁴ The references to the land reform in the historical books written in this period are more or less similar to the evaluation of the programme given in *An Outline History of the Vietnam Worker's Party (1930-1975)*, an official Party history. In this book, the party views the programme as follows:

The success of the land reform was great and fundamental. It assumed a strategic character. In the course of the land reform, we committed a number of serious errors. The Party Central Committee found out those mistakes in time and absolutely redressed them.⁵

Another example is *Revolution in the Village: Nam Hong 1945-1975*. In this book, the authors refer to the incident as follows:

As in other communes, Nam Hong made errors in the process of the agrarian reform. Some peasants were wrongly classified as landowners or rich peasants; some guerrillas and revolutionary cadres were accused of being reactionaries. However, Nam Hong was quick to correct these mistakes and rapidly restored an atmosphere of unity and harmony in the commune.⁶

Specific details about the errors are thus deliberately avoided in the party's attempt to construct social memory. Back in the mid 1950s, the land reform caused great fear

⁴ For example, Lê Mậu Hãn (ed.). *Đại Cương Lịch Sử Việt Nam tập III* (The Outline of Vietnamese History). Vol. 3. Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1999. Pp. 137-142.

⁵ *An Outline of the Vietnam Workers' Party (1930-1975)*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1976. P. 82.

⁶ Pham Cuong and Nguyen Van B. *Revolution in the Village: Nam Hong 1945-1975*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House. Date of publication unknown. P. 33.

among people all over North Vietnam, but this feeling was not limited just to the countryside, as it also spread to the city. This was because a number of peasants moved into the city, as they were too terrified to live in the countryside. In so doing, they also invoked their relatives and friends in the urban areas in the feelings of hostility and fear they brought with them. The failure of the land reform programme intensified the conflict between the state and writers, artists and intellectuals who were disenchanted by the force and violence employed by cadres during the campaign. For instance, Trần Đức Thảo, a former philosophy professor at the Sorbonne who gave up Existentialism for Marxist ideology, became disillusioned with the Communist leaders after the land reform programme ended with disastrous results. He commented that the unsuccessful land reform was merely a good example of the lack of democracy. Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, a law professor from Hanoi University, expressed his views on the errors of the campaign from a legal perspective. He stressed that the disappointing results of the campaign underlined the failure of the legal system of the regime. For him, it was wrong that a member of a landlord's family, or anybody who was accused of being connected to the landowning class, had to be imprisoned or punished for crimes they did not actually commit.⁷

However, the land reform has been discussed more openly and widely in literary works. Novels, short stories and poems written in the late 1950s quickly responded to the aftermath of the land reform and clearly voiced the frustration and disappointment of the peasants, such as the novel *Sắp Cưới* (About to Marry) as discussed in chapter one. Many of the works that mentioned the errors of the land reform policy, however, were withdrawn from circulation. Some writers were commanded to write self-criticisms for having expressed negative ideas about the campaign and the government's policy. The case of the well-known short-story writer, Kim Lân, is an example. Soon after the errors of the land reform campaign were announced, Kim Lân wrote a short story entitled *Ông Lão Hàng Xóm* (Mr. Neighbour), which was published in the controversial journal *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm*. The content of the story is a criticism of the land reform. But he might have regretted writing this story, because he was ordered to take a course to correct his ideology and to write an article

⁷ The works of these writers are reprinted in *Trăm Hoa Đưa Nở trên Đất Bắc* (One Hundred Flowers Blossom in the North). Paris: Quê Mẹ, 1983. The English version of Nguyễn Mạnh Tường's article is published in Hoang Van Chi (ed.). *The New Class in North Vietnam*. Saigon: Cong Dan, 1958. Pp. 134-165.

confessing that his views on the land reform were false. Here is a part of his self-criticism:

The fact is that there were some errors during the land reform campaign, but it is also a fact that there were not only errors during the campaign. In fact, the land reform did not cause injustice, and destroy the belief and happiness of people as I misrepresented. In fact, the land reform was a big success of the revolution. The land reform campaign overthrew the exploiting landowning class, distributed land, brought happiness and the right to live back to millions of peasants. I just did not recognise the humanitarian meaning and achievement of the campaign.⁸

From the 1950s to the mid 1980s, writers were implicitly ordered to keep silent about this issue and it soon became a forbidden subject under the Communist government. However, since the Renovation policy on the freedom of expression was announced in 1986, the land reform has been discussed and reviewed again, and mainly in literary texts. The next part of this study tries to show how the land reform has been explored, retold and recreated in short stories and novels produced in the post-1975 period.

5.2. The Memory of the Land Reform in Post-1975 Literature

This part will concern itself mainly with two subjects: how the land reform is remembered through literary texts and from what point of view it has been told. By juxtaposing literary works by writers from different generations, we will see how the land reform has been recounted and reinterpreted over the post-war years. A precursory remark offered is that writers from different generations convey different views towards the land reform. Besides this, the experience and perceptions of the land reform have been significant not only in shaping the outlook and political standpoint of each individual towards the present, but also in conveying a general picture of how the past event stays in the collective memory. The products of individual pasts shown in post-1975 literature will help us understand to what extent history plays a vital role in the present consciousness of Vietnamese people. In other words, individuals identify themselves with the past in order to understand their

⁸ Kim Lân, 'Tôi đã Viết Ông Lão Hàng Xóm Trong Một Tình Trạng Tư Tưởng Như Thế Nào?' (In What Ideological Condition did I write the short story Mr. Neighbour?) in *Văn Nghệ*, no. 12, May 1958. P. 114.

identity in the present. As LaCapra explains, the connection between memory and history is as follows:

Of course memory is not identical with history. But neither is it the opposite of history. Their relation over time may vary, but not as a function of a categorical opposition between 'us' and 'them'. And the problem of their actual and desirable interaction is oversimplified by a stark opposition between the two. Memory is a crucial source for history and has complicated relations to documentary sources...Conversely, history serves to question and test memory in crucial fashion and to specify what in it is empirically accurate or has a different, but still possibly significant status.⁹

James Fentress and Chris Wickham explain the importance of memory that is transmitted through stories as follows:

Stories do more than represent particular events: they connect, clarify, and interpret events in a general fashion. Stories provide us with a set of stock explanations which underlie our predispositions to interpret reality in the ways that we do...Memory is not merely retrospective; it is prospective as well. Memory provides a prospective for interpreting our experiences in the present and for foreseeing these that lie ahead.¹⁰

However, they warn that the story told from memory is not necessarily always the truth. As they assert:

We may sometimes, it seems, only be deluding ourselves when we think we are 'debunking' social memory by separating myth from facts: all we may get is another story. This does not mean that we must accept social memory passively and uncritically. We can enter into dialogue with it, examining its arguments, and testing its formal claims. But this interrogation cannot uncover the whole truth. It is a mistake to imagine that, having squeezed it for its facts,

⁹Quoted in Molasky, Michael S. *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*. London & New York: Routledge, 1999. P. 4.

¹⁰ Fentress, James and Chris Wickham. *Social Memory*. UK and USA: Blackwell, 1994. P. 51.

examined its arguments, and reconstructed its experience - that is to say, having turned it into 'history' - we are through with memory.¹¹

Reading the texture of the past from various angles will help understand how writers from different generations, and fictional characters from different circumstances, make contact with each other through the recollections of the past and viewpoints of the land reform and other agricultural policies. Also, determining an author's point of view is an important literary technique and vital element in creating and reading a narrative. As Scholes and Kellogg explain:

If we think of a generalised 'novelist' and his equally generalised 'readers' we can see that, for the novelist, point of view is the primary way he controls and shapes his materials. Once made, his choice of point of view and the mode of language appropriate to it will influence his presentation of character, incident, and every other thing represented. For the reader, however, point of view is not an aesthetic matter but a mode of perception. The point of view in a given novel controls the reader's impression of everything else.¹²

It is noticeable that the post-1975 literature only reveals the negative facts of the land reform, and the question of whether or not this programme achieved any good results may occur to many audiences. It is true that a number of poor peasants benefited from the land reform campaign. In Hy Van Luong's research, a peasant in Son-Duong reveals that, '*at the time of land reform, we were classified as a poor peasant family and received a few sao (360 square metres) of rice fields. Our lives improved considerably because we no longer worked for other people.*'¹³ The same author also states that the land reform process also helped remove '*the male oriented, kinship-centred, class-structured model of hierarchy in the local tradition.*'¹⁴ Likewise, Pham Van Bich accepts that the campaign gave good results:

In sum, the land reform was a response to genuine demands from the poor peasants. In fact it made a radical effort to provide adequate landholdings for

¹¹ Ibid., p. 202.

¹² Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. London, Oxford University Press, 1966. P. 275.

¹³ Hy Van Luong. *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992. P. 200.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 196.

this sector of the population and gave them what they had always dreamed of—lands and buffaloes, that is to say, the economic basis to earn secure living. However, as an unintended consequence of this, the landlord family ties were seriously undermined. Although only those families classified as landlords came under heavy fire, the land reform brought about wide-ranging repercussions in society at large...The class approach brought about gains to landless and poor peasants, and losses to land landlords. However, the losses were so heavy that their psychological effects persisted, while the material gains seem to be neglected even by the beneficiaries.¹⁵

Pham Van Bich's evaluation of the land reform and the psychological effects it left on Vietnamese society helps explain why only the negative side of the land reform is remembered in literary texts. Moreover, the fact that the tragedy of the event is only emphasised in literature can be seen as a reaction to the cryptic and conflicting memory of the land reform given by the state's record of national history. The following sections therefore offer an analysis of literary works on the land reform. The discussion here is mainly based on five literary works: *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare) [1990] by Ngô Ngọc Bội, *Những Thiên Đường Mù* (Paradise of the Blind) [1988] by Dương Thu Hương, *Mê Lộ* (Labyrinth) [1989] by Đỗ Chu, *Lão Khổ* (The Old Khổ) [1992] by Tạ Duy Anh, and *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days) [1993] by Võ Văn Trục, which also refers to agricultural collectivisation.

5.2.1. A Cadre's Perspective

The novel *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare) [1990] by Ngô Ngọc Bội is told from the point of view of Ngô Bảo, a veteran of the Điện Biên Phủ battlefield and a political cadre who was sent with a team to carry out a land reform campaign in a village in Northern Vietnam. By telling the account from the perspective of an eyewitness who participated in the land reform campaign, the author wants to claim the authenticity of his story. Like the protagonist in his novel, Ngô Ngọc Bội himself took part in this campaign as a cadre. In fact, Ngô Ngọc Bội later revealed that Ngô Bảo in the story is actually the writer himself. Therefore, readers can assume that the novel is based on direct experience and first-hand information.

¹⁵ Pham Van Bich. *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta*. Surrey: Curzon, 1999. Pp. 75-76.

What I wrote is entirely genuine. It is obvious that anybody would write from real life experience, but I have tried to base my works on actual facts and real experience. I am not just an outsider who wants to comment on what I heard...The two main characters in the novel *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare), Ngô Bảo and Mẫn, are in fact myself and my wife. 80 percent in this novel is based on the reality...¹⁶

The importance of *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare) is that it gives a thorough and detailed account of the land reform campaign. Ngô Ngọc Bội describes chronologically the stages of the campaign. From this novel, we learn that the campaign was divided into four procedures. First, cadres would go to live with a poor peasant family in order to *thăm nghèo hỏi khổ* (share poverty and sufferings). Then, they had to convince the peasants that their sufferings were caused by the exploitation of the landlords, not by predestination, as they had understood. The cadres also had to find so-called *rễ* (roots) among the poorest peasants in the village. These *rễ* were regarded as *cốt cán* (the pillars of the land reform). After having been ideologically mobilised by cadres, these *rễ* would go to mobilise other peasants, called *chuỗi* (beads). Then, the second stage of the land reform campaign was to organise a village meeting and mobilise peasants to struggle and fight against traitors and reactionaries. The third stage was the rent and interest reduction programme. The final stage was to strengthen village organisation, review accomplishments and increase production.¹⁷

This explanation of the process of the land reform is important not only because it represents reality but also because it demystifies critical speculations and fragmentation of the campaign. The novel participates in the struggle in national memory over one of the unforgettable events in Vietnamese history. In short, the novel attempts to give a complete picture of what happened during the land reform in the 1950s. From this aspect, it can be assumed that the narrator is reliable in stating

¹⁶ Ngô Thảo and Lại Nguyên Ân (eds.). *Nhà Văn Việt Nam Chân Dung Tự Hoạ* (The Self-portrayals of Vietnamese Writers). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1995. Pp. 24-25.

¹⁷ For a more thorough history of the land reform, see Moise, Edwin Evariste. *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: at the Village Level*. 2 volumes. Ph.D. thesis. The University of Michigan, 1977, and White, Christine Katherin. *Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution: 1920-1957*. Ph.D. thesis. Cornell University, 1981.

There is a published version.

facts because he took part in the programme himself. However, this is also a major weak point of the novel because its outline is very similar to historical notes.

The author tries to explain where the errors started. In the story, the cadre Bảo recognises that it is wrong to accuse some peasants of being in the landowning class, and it is also wrong to torture them. However, in such chaotic circumstances, he is afraid that his colleagues might suspect him of being ideologically influenced and swayed by class enemies. Becoming aware that a female colleague has fallen in love with him, Bảo makes her do all the jobs that he does not want to do himself, such as denouncing landlords or mobilising the hatred against the landowning class. So the character Bảo is not entirely good: he can be manipulative and exploits the love of a woman to keep himself intact from the demoralising process of the campaign, but at the same time he is not brave enough to go against the tide. Yet, the narrator tries to convince us that it was political vicissitudes that turn Bảo into a coward.

From Bảo's perspective, the errors of the land reform campaign began at the first step of searching for *rễ* (roots). It is not difficult to find *rễ* because almost every peasant in village is poor. However, it is more difficult to mobilise and educate these *rễ*, who are described as *dốt nát* (ignorant), *hung hãn* (impetuous) and *thiếu văn hoá* (philistine). The representatives of peasants therefore do not understand the policy of land reform and have to rely mainly on the instructions of cadres. During the 1950s, the expression Nhất Đội, Nhì Trời (Cadres come first, and God comes second) was popular among peasants in North Vietnam.¹⁸

Tô Hoài, another revolutionary writer and former cadre of the land reform campaign, also refers to the process of *bắt rễ* (finding roots) in his memoir *Chiều Chiều* (Afternoons) [1999].¹⁹ He reveals that the search was carried out in a simplistic way. Cadres just looked at the condition of the houses and usually decided that the owner of the most worn out and ragged house should be chosen as *rễ*. However, after talking

¹⁸ Lâm Thanh Liêm, 'Chính Sách Cải Cách Ruộng Đất của Hồ Chí Minh: Sai Lầm hay Tội ác?' (The Land Reform Policy of Ho Chinh Minh: Error or Cruelty) in *Hồ Chí Minh: Sự Thật về Thân Thế & Sự Nghiệp*. (The Truth about Ho Chi Minh and His Work). Vol. 1. Paris: NXB Nam Á, 1990. P. 185.

¹⁹ The book was withdrawn from circulation soon after it was put on the market. This is not surprising because the content of the memoir reveals negative things of the past and the failures of government policies. It is speculated that the reason why censorship officials chose to remove the copies from the circulation quickly and quietly, instead of publicly denouncing the book and its author, as in the case of Dương Thu Hương in the late 1980s, is because they were afraid that it would make the book even more popular.

with some potential *trở*, Tô Hoài realised that the reason for the poverty in the countryside was not always the result of landlord exploitation, but was sometimes simply due to the ignorance and laziness of the peasants themselves. Another problem was that some cadres did not know anything about ricefields or the peasants. Tô Hoài gives his own case as an example. Although he was from a rural area, people in his village did not grow rice. They specialised in making silk and paper. For this reason, he knew very little about land and rice production, but still he was sent to join the land reform campaign. This is what Tô Hoài recalls:

I didn't really know how big was a sào (360 square metres) or a mẫu (3600 square metres). I couldn't tell the difference between corn trees, sugar canes or reeds. Anyway, I taught peasants how to denounce the landowning class, and how to measure and divide land into smaller plots. At that time, I could answer whatever the peasants asked. Well, as a cadre of the land reform campaign, you must act as if you know everything.²⁰

The novel *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare) also describes the tenseness of the atmosphere in the village. Animosity was heightened when the cadres had to put peasants into different categories according to land possession. Those who were classified as landlords were publicly denounced and some were executed. The number of landlords in each village was calculated from the population of the whole country and did not always reflect the reality of each village. In order to identify the number of landlords required by the government, cadres in some villages had to distort the facts and deliberately categorise some middle-class peasants as landlords. This created worries not only for the peasants but also for a number of cadres. As Ngô Ngọc Bội observes, most revolutionaries and cadres were from landlord and rich peasant families and were more educated than their fellows in the countryside. During the campaign, some cadres deserted because of the news that in their native village their parents were categorised as landlords, beaten up, maltreated or even killed.

Some patriotic landlords who had supported the revolution were tortured and in some cases also executed. Lê Đôn, Bảo's father-in-law is an example. Lê Đôn was a well-educated man from a wealthy landowning family. He contributed greatly to the

²⁰ Tô Hoài. *Chiều Chiều* (Afternoons). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1999. P. 35.

nationalist movement during the 1940s. However, during the land reform campaign, he was classified as a landlord. According to the land reform regulations, a death sentence was to be given only when it was proved that a landowner had committed four crimes: *bóc lột* (exploitation), *chiếm đoạt* (seizing property), *nợ máu* (blood debt) and *hiếp dâm* (rape). To complete the process and give Lê Đôn a death sentence, the cadres had to fabricate evidence for these crimes. They also made village people believe that Lê Đôn had really committed these crimes, and they mobilised hatred against him among peasants. Then, the village committee organised *toà án nhân dân đặc biệt* (a special people's court) where landowners were condemned in front of peasants. In order to make the accusations more credible, cadres also persuaded the children of some landlords and rich peasants to denounce their own parents before the special people's court. For the sake of their survival, the children of accused landlords normally had to comply with this command. This left a legacy of tension and ill-feeling between family members and people in the village even after the end of the campaign.

Hy Van Luong's factual study of a village in Northern Vietnam confirms that Ngô Ngọc Bội's story is realistic. The rigid class division and discrimination against landlords applied during the land reform has left its effect on relationships in the village and among members of the family. In Hy Van Luong's study, a peasant recalls:

In this entire episode, the physical loss meant relatively little in comparison to the emotional trauma and the damage to the social fabric. After my wife passed away, in my absence, my children moved her tomb away from my father's because of the bitterness in their relationship after her public denunciation and her indirect rejection of their kinship tie by the term of address used during the trial. Even nowadays, I still do not feel comfortable in the presence of the relatives who denounced my father and addressed him with the terms *mày* and *tao*²¹ on that trial day more than three decades ago. It is still embarrassing for us to interact.²²

²¹ *mày* (you) and *tao* (I/me) are pronouns that can be used to address each other among close friends, or with those who are younger or from lower social status. However, in this case, the use of *mày* and *tao* show total disrespect and denial of kinship relations.

²² Hy Van Luong. *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988*. P. 189.

Apart from Ngô Ngọc Bội, there was a writer from a younger generation, Nguyễn Khắc Trường, who also referred in his famous novel *Mảnh Đất Lắm Người Nhiều Ma* (A Plot of Land With Many People and Ghosts) [1990] to the broken relationship between father and son due to an incident during the land reform. The excerpt below is a satire of the land reform procedure when a young cadre, Vũ Định Phúc, has to condemn his own father, Vũ Định Đại, in front of the people's court.

When his turn came, Phúc stepped forward

'Landlord Đại, do you know who I am?'

'I do, Sir, since I dared give birth to you!'²³

Ngô Ngọc Bội clearly points out that the peasants who were classified as landlords and rich peasants were more affected by dehumanisation than by maltreatment and hard labour. He conveys this through the words of Bảo's father who was denounced as a rich peasant:

It is not only the lack of food. The main hardship is being mentally tormented (hành hạ về tinh thần) and having the right to be a human being taken away (bị tước quyền làm người).²⁴

Ngô Ngọc Bội concludes that the campaign had a wide range of effects on the relationships in the village community. Here is an example:

According to Bảo, the policy of abolishing the private property system and feudalism, taking the land and dividing it between peasants is right, but its implementation is too simplistic. Only small numbers of the rich people live in the countryside and almost all of them hate the colonial regime. Even before the Party was in power, the rich peasants always took part in and actively supported the revolution. The reactionaries followed the French to the South. We need to find a different method to deal with those rich peasants who remained. If we only need to take land from the rich and give it to the poor,

²³ The translation of the first two chapters of this novel is printed in *The Vietnam Literature Review* by Vietnam Writers' Association, no. 1, 2000. Pp. 59-84.

²⁴ Ngô Ngọc Bội. *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare). Hanoi: Lao Động, 1990. P.67.

only a small campaign of dividing land and offering land would be enough. Why do we need to use millions of people and spend billions of money for accusing and denouncing landlords, and in killing without any control?...Is it true that actually it was our hands that drew a tiger on the wall to threaten ourselves? These mistakes can never be buried or hidden away! ²⁵

With his peasant origins and working experience in the rural areas as a Party official, there is no doubt that Ngô Ngọc Bội had a profound understanding of rural problems and a genuine sympathy for peasants. In the following statement Ngô Ngọc Bội reveals the interconnection between his literary life, political career, peasants and the countryside:

I have been a member of the Communist Party since I was 19 years old (1948). If I had chosen to follow the road to power, my social position would not have been mediocre. But, I was born with the 'blood of an artist'. So, I chose early on to pursue a literary career. I mainly wrote about the countryside because I myself am a peasant and a large area of Vietnam is still countryside. My literary life has always been related to the peasants. For fifty years, I have been a peasant, Party member, writer and also journalist. I fully supported the war and revolution, but at the same time, I was also worried about the Party's policy towards the countryside. My writings have always reflected this tossing and turning. This is also a reason why it took a long time for my works to get published... Through the long period of struggle under the leadership of the party, one thing is proved. If we want to do something for our people, we need to start from the cradle, namely to develop from the roots of our national culture.²⁶

Undeniably, Ngô Ngọc Bội's writings reflect his interest in the development of rural society and the agricultural economy, and it appears that his literary corpus is dedicated to the concerns of the peasants. However, whether or not Ngô Ngọc Bội actually regards himself as a Party member, a writer and a peasant as he claims in his short stories and novels, the voice of a political cadre prevails. His novel *Ác Mộng*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁶ *Hội nhà văn Việt Nam. Nhà Văn Việt Nam Hiện Đại (Contemporary Vietnamese Writers). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1997. P. 78.*

(Nightmare) is no exception, because he chooses to tell the story of the land reform from a cadre's point of view instead of a peasant's. Thus, the tone of the narrative represents the view of the government and Party officials. That is to say, it is similar to any official documents on this subject: the Party admitted that errors had been committed during the land reform campaign, but it tried its best to correct those errors. For instance, this passage taken from the novel is similar in tone to many historical works:

Uncle Hồ requested us to live in harmony. The Party Secretary had to resign. The Party gave orders for corrections to be made. When we realise there is an error, we correct it. This is the strength of our Party. Obviously, there are things that we can correct, but also some things that we cannot. Perhaps only time can fade fearful memory away.²⁷

It is also interesting to highlight Ngô Ngọc Bội's remark in the last part of the interview cited above, in which he emphasises the development from inside the indigenous culture of Vietnam rather than borrowing from foreign models or values. This may imply that the errors of the land reform programme occurred because it strictly followed the Chinese model. In the novel *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare), Ngô Ngọc Bội repeatedly mentions that the mistakes of the land reform programme were partly caused by its dependence on the Chinese model, which was not adapted to Vietnamese society. Ngô Ngọc Bội's view is shared by Tố Hữu, a famous poet and former politburo member (1976-1986). In his memoir, *Nhớ Lại Một Thời* (Remembering One Time) [2000], Tố Hữu comments that the land reform was the most appropriate policy to solve the problem of land distribution in the Vietnamese countryside. The Party leaders agreed that patriotic landlords who supported the revolution would be persuaded to give most of their land to landless and small landholding peasants but still be allowed to keep small pieces of land for their own families. However, the errors started only when Chinese representatives arrived with strict rules and practices. According to Tố Hữu, the Chinese insisted that those who had an amount of land more than twice the average amount of land owned by people in the village should be considered landlords. This was why many middle-class peasants were wrongly classified as landlords, whereas many members of the

²⁷ Ngô Ngọc Bội. *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare). p. 197-198.

landowning class and French collaborators had already fled to the South by the start of the land reform campaign.²⁸

It is evident that Ngô Ngọc Bội's intention is to reveal what really happened during the campaign. The narrator's main focus is to tell what was going on during the land reform campaign and to examine the causes and effects of the errors. The story is told from an objective view despite the expressions of regret and disappointment throughout the novel. Recalling the story from the point of view of a cadre, the author concludes that this infamous episode was an inevitable process of history. The sufferings of the victims and the reaction of the peasants are mentioned, but the focal point of the novel is to call for an understanding of the participants in the campaign and their mistakes. As the character Bảo emphasises throughout the story, amidst such chaos there was not much that the cadres could do to prevent the errors. They were not even able to defend themselves against false accusations or resist the rigid rules laid down by Party officials, or against the influence of the Chinese model, as many Vietnamese like to believe. Some writers from the younger generation find this apologetic viewpoint unfavourable, and they are not happy just to let bygones be bygones. In the next part, we will discuss Đỗ Chu's short story, which tells us how one landlord thought about the land reform.

5.2.2. A Landlord's Perspective

The process of denouncing, humiliating and executing the landowning class caused widespread fear and terror among peasants. During the campaign, peasants followed the instructions of cadres even when they did not understand what was going on. When the peasants were ordered to denounce their neighbours, they did so, even if it was against their will, in order to prevent themselves being suspected of having a connection with the landlords. An article in the newspaper *Nhân Dân* (The People) reported that this kind of fear was out of control. Peasants tried to avoid talking or having anything to do with those who were classified as landowners and their families; even the hairdresser refused to cut hair for landlords' families or anybody who had *liên quan* (a connection) to the landowning class.²⁹ Moreover, peasants dared

²⁸ Tố Hữu. *Nhớ Lại Một Thời* (Remembering One Time). Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 2000. Pp. 274-277.

²⁹ Hoàng Văn Chi (ed.). *The New Class in North Vietnam*. Saigon: Cong An, 1958. Pp. 56-58.

not show their sympathy for the accused landlords in public. A peasant from a Northern village recalled how his father had been categorised as a landlord:

Few people dared to see my family in those days... few villagers who took pity on my family hid small bags of rice and a few corncobs under their shirts. They reportedly called in from the outside, 'Is the bastard landlord home? He'd better be home!' and discreetly threw the food inside if no other villagers were around.³⁰

In the short story *Mê Lô* (Labyrinth) [1989], Đỗ Chu relates how an accused landowner and his family had to endure humiliation and terrible psychological effects. An omniscient narrator is used to tell the story. An advantage of this technique is that the narrator knows everything and can shift freely from the perspective of one character to that of another. In this short story, the storyteller moves between the three characters of the family: father, mother and son. This both helps readers to hear the story from their respective points of view, and accentuates how the errors of the land reform campaign caused tragedy for each individual.

The story starts with the mental breakdown and memory loss of Trữ. He is a promising young soldier. Yet, things begins to change when his father is classified as an exploiting landlord. This causes an awkward feeling between Trữ's soldier colleagues because they do not know how to treat him appropriately. Trữ might be their commander, colleague and friend, but at the same time he is the child of a landowner, regarded as the class enemy of the peasants and socialist development. As we can see, other social relationships are overshadowed by class relations, and the belief that class would determine everything. Unfortunately, Trữ's excellent record in the army is marred by his family background.³¹ Trữ therefore has a hard time in the

³⁰ Hy Van Luong. *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988*. Pp. 190-191.

³¹ The fact that the children of landowning class were discriminated is also reflected in the poem, *The Enemy's Child*, published in *Giai Phẩm mùa thu*, the poet Hoàng Cầm told us about the inner conflict of a female cadre, between the concept of class struggle and the sympathy she has for a landlord's child:

A little girl, just six years old,
Wandered lonely, begging food-
Her father for a <debt of blood>
Shot by <the people>, lying cold;
And her mother, southwards flown,
Driven by panic, had left her alone.

army as his colleagues keep a close eye on him because they suspect that he might be ideologically influenced by his class origin. The key incident that leads Trữ to mental breakdown and memory loss occurs when his rank is lowered by five levels. It is later discovered there had been a mistake, and that he had in fact been promoted to a higher position, but his commander misread the title of his new rank. However, it was then too late for Trữ to recover his memory.

The anxiety and frustration of Trữ as the child of a landlord is clearly described. His mental torment results from a combination of outrage that his father has been wrongly classified as a landlord and the hope that errors will be properly resolved. Meanwhile, in the army unit tension is building around him as his colleagues speculate on how Trữ is going to react to this situation. Pressure keeps growing until his abrupt demotion shocks him to the core and he loses the capacity to deal with reality. He loses his memory and retreats into a dream world in order to escape from the cruelty and injustice of the society within which he was living.

Like his son, Trữ's father at first believed in justice, and never thought that he would be categorised as a landlord. The father even agreed that the land reform policy was a good solution to the problem of landholding in the Vietnamese countryside. The naivety of father and son creates the irony in the story. According to Scholes and Kellogg, irony is *'always the result of a disparity of understanding. In any situation in which one person knows or perceives more-or less-than another, irony must be actually or potentially present. In any example of narrative art these are, broadly speaking, three points of view-these of the characters, the narrator, and the audience.'*³²

A <hardcore> woman, seeing this, went
 With tearful eyes to the girl without guile
 And said: <the child is innocent
 But daughter of a landlord vile.
 I was summoned before the Court
 For giving her a bowl of soup>.
 The young girl cadre, trembling and pale
 Pictured herself thrown in jailed.
 She stared, with all her thoughts in a whirl,
 At the tired and starving orphan girl.
 No <enemy> could she see there,
 Only a baby in need of care.

Quoted from Hoang Van Chi. *The New Class in North Vietnam*. Saigon: Cong Dan, 1958. Pp. 120-122.

³² Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. P. 240.

Here, in *Mê Lô* (Labyrinth), the narrator and audience know that both the father's and the son's hopes for justice will be dashed. The characters are anxious about what is going to happen to them. As readers, we know better than the characters and can guess what will follow. Thus, we are not surprised when they face the injustices of the land reform campaign, while our sympathy for their misfortunes is increased. The control of irony is a successful aspect of this short story. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see the errors of the land reform programme that the peasants in the story could not. It is, thus, difficult for the father to understand why he, a good farmer who has a son serving in the army, has to endure such maltreatment. This disparity of viewpoints allows readers to foresee the catastrophe that befalls the characters. At the same time, it generates a more sympathetic feeling for the anguish of the characters when they wonder how their misfortunes can be explained. As the father ponders:

He (the father) was proud of Trữ and the other comrades, and he always put his faith in them. He considered them as his own children, nephews and members of his family. These people would be the future of the nation. He could not believe the ruthlessness which they carried out the land reform policy. Why? He was disappointed and devastated.³³

The father decides to take his own life because he finds it difficult to cope with maltreatment and humiliation in front of cadres and his village fellows. He is also disappointed in the other peasants because nobody dares to speak the truth or to step forward to defend justice. The peasants are too terrified to think of anything, except how to survive or not to be seen as being connected to the landlords. Suicide is a device to dignify the life of a peasant and to criticise the regime for failing to protect him from injustice. From the landlord's perspective, it is not worth living because his pride has been damaged, not because his land has been taken away. After the mental breakdown of her son and the suicide of her husband, the mother is left behind. The only reason that she tries to continue living, despite the unpleasant reality, is to look after her son.

Also, it is mentioned that the fish in the pond disappear after the father's death. This supernatural detail gives the metaphoric meaning that prosperity is impossible where virtues do not exist. The fishpond is, apart from rice production, an income source for

³³ Đỗ Chu. *Mê Lô* (Labyrinth). Hanoi: NXB Tác Phẩm Mới, 1989. P. 81.

Trữ's family, but the abundance of the fish requires proper knowledge, patience and hard labour from the person who looks after them. The land reform cadres and other peasants look only at the final output which is the money earned from the fish, but they fail to consider the whole process required to obtain that money. Therefore, when the man of virtue no longer lives, the fish also cease to exist.

The mother finds that life is not so cruel when she discovers that Trữ had a son with a hill tribe woman. She is happy that at least the family has a descendant. That the narrative switches from the land reform terror to the secret love affair of Trữ is a surprise, but gives a good ending to the story. Towards the end of the story, the mother can die in peace because she does not have to worry about descendants; and Trữ is not all alone in this world. However, this ending is ironic because we know that it is only fiction that can provide a rewarding result and give compensation to the victims. Miracles would be rare in real life.

The short story *Mê Lộ* (Labyrinth) gives a very interesting account of the land reform campaign from the perspective of an accused landlord and his family, the victims of the errors of the campaign. It also emphasises the virtues of the peasants and their belief in morality and dignity. From this viewpoint, we see that the greatest effect of the land reform on the peasants was that it took away their pride. However, from this detail, the author's attitude towards the male concept of dignity and virtues is evident. Here Đỗ Chu makes a clear distinction between how a man and a woman would react to injustice. The father prefers to die rather than become a subject of humiliation, whereas the mother is seen as more selfless and tolerant in this matter. She seems to care more about the happiness of her son than the concept of self-respect. We will examine this topic further in the next section through a discussion of Dương Thu Hương's novel, which represents a female point of view.

5.2.3. A Woman's Perspective

Historical accounts of the land reform have predominantly been written by men. Similarly, in the literary sphere, this historical incident is usually remembered from the male point of view. Thus, when the female writer Dương Thu Hương presented a tale of land reform in her controversial novel *Những Thiên Đường Mù* (Paradise of the Blind) [1988], it can be seen as an endeavour to take part in the historical

commemoration from the perspective of women. Gender difference is considered as a key factor in the production and reception of literature. As Susan Sniader Lanser, a literary theorist, asserts:

Gender is also central to cultural communication because of the importance gender distinctions play in everyday life. Sex differences therefore permeate the uses of language and condition the reception of discourse; along with other social identifiers marking the relationship of a textual personage to the dominant social class, sex is important to the encoding and decoding of narrative voice.³⁴

Dương Thu Hương's version of the land reform focuses on its effects on women and on the bitter memories they carried with them afterwards. The story is told from the point of view of a young girl, called Hằng. She focuses on the impact of the land reform on her family life. The peaceful atmosphere of the village soon disappears when Chính, Hằng's uncle, comes back to the village. He is now a cadre and assigned to carry out the land reform policy at the village level. The first task he has is to command Quế, Hằng's mother, to leave Tồn, Hằng's father, because his family is classified as landowning class. Chính is worried that having a sister married to a member of the landlord's family would have a bad effect on his political life. Hằng's father cannot tolerate the discrimination from the land reform teams and insults from other peasants. Her grandmother dies because of maltreatment, while her aunt, Tâm, has to sleep in the paddy field and endure hard work. To prevent herself from the assault of some male villagers, Tâm has to carry a knife on her back, even when sleeping.

Dương Thu Hương disclosed in an interview that the novel *Những Thiên Đường Mù* (Paradise of the Blind) is modelled on her childhood memory. She was eight years old when the land reform campaign came to her home village in Bắc Ninh province. In the same interview, she revealed that she would never get rid of the memory of a man accused of being a landlord who committed suicide.³⁵ According to the evaluation of

³⁴ Lanser, Susan Sniader. *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. P. 166.

³⁵ The interview is reprinted in *Tram Hoa vẫn Nở trên Quê Hương: Cao Trào Văn Nghệ Phản Kháng tại Việt Nam (1986-1989)* (One Hundred Flowers still Blossom in the Homeland: The Dissident Movement in Vietnam (1986-1989)). P. 197-198.

the writer Mai Văn Tạo, *Những Thiên Đường Mù* (Paradise of the Blind) 'portrays, to some extent, the tragedy of the whole nation'.³⁶ Dương Thu Hương's childhood memory of terror is written into the novel, which provides a vivid description of the fearsome and intense atmosphere of the land reform:

My mother never understood the tragedy that had befallen her. Like so many others at this time, she began to live in constant terror. Uncle Chinh struck hard and fast. My grandmother and my aunt were forced to prostrate themselves, head bowed, arms crossed behind their backs, in the communal village courtyard. Facing them, behind a blaze of torches, sat the people of our village. They obeyed the orders:

Listen to our denunciation of their crimes. Then, shout a slogan: 'Down with the landowning classes!' Raise your fist like this and scream: 'Down, down!'

They were told that the louder they screamed, the greater their fervour and the firmer the proof of their revolutionary spirit, of the hatred they felt for the 'exploiters', the landowner classes. Among these so-called 'exploiters' were many well-to-do villagers, people who owned just a bit of land, who cherished their rice paddies like their own flesh...³⁷

The impact of the land reform on women is demonstrated through the struggles of the three female characters: Quế, the mother, Tâm, the aunt, and Hằng, the daughter, who is the narrator of the story. According to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'the twin images of constant mother and unreliable father' are dominant features in Vietnamese imagination. The representation of women is related to maternal tenderness, constancy and boundless love, whereas men are portrayed as unreliable fathers who are always absent emotionally and physically. This is due to the prevailing condition of the long period of wartime when men had to be away from home and women were left behind to take charge of the family economy and to look after the children. In the Vietnamese context, men symbolise power both in the house and in public life, but in

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³⁷ Dương Thu Hương. *Paradise of the Blind*. Translated by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson. USA: Penguin, 1993. Pp. 24-25.

imaginative works such as folktales male power is often seen as unreliable.³⁸ In Dương Thu Hương's novel, the representation of female sacrifice and the unreliability of male power is also inherited from this tradition, as shown through the relationship between Quế and her younger brother, Chính.

Quế's love for her brother is unlimited: she agrees to separate from her husband in order to secure Chính's political career, because it was better that nobody in Chính's family should have a connection with a member of an accused landowning family. Quế stays at home to look after the altar of the family's ancestors while Chính is always absent from the village due to his revolutionary activity. Then, he comes back as a powerful cadre who takes charge in the land reform campaign. Later, it is proved that his power is unreliable or even corrupt. The land reform programme fails and he becomes the subject of hatred and anger by his fellow peasants. Chính flees away while Quế stays behind to suffer the insults from villagers on his behalf.

Through the character of aunt Tâm, Dương Thu Hương describes how the land reform campaign has destroyed the individual happiness of a woman. Although surviving the campaign, Tâm has lost almost everything: her mother died, her brother left the village and her house and property have been confiscated and distributed among poor peasants. The memory of the past event is carried with her for the rest of her life. Part of her revenge is to get rich, even richer than when she was classified as the daughter of a landowner. For her, this is the only way to recover the honour of her family and to earn respect from other peasants. Tâm works so hard that she has no time to think about having a family. After aunt Tâm's death, Hằng discovers wedding dresses, make-up powder and money at Tâm's house. These items show that Tâm would have liked to marry but her plan was disrupted by the tragedy of her family. As stressed by the narrator, the land reform destroyed the youth and happiness of a woman, including the chance to fulfil female dreams, such as to experience motherhood.

It was a thick wad of bills the likes of which no one would ever give to a child. I was shaking now. How could I take the money of a woman who had never known motherhood, or a man's love, who had camped out on tree roots for a

³⁸ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting' in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.). *The Country of Memory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Pp. 168-170.

whole winter, slept with a knife under her neck? She had saved this money, note by note. This was her revenge, her only answer to existence.³⁹

As for Hằng, her family is torn apart by the memory of the land reform programme. After the incident, it seemed impossible that the friendship between aunt Tâm, a former landowner, and her mother, the sister of a former land reform cadre, would be restored. Hằng wants to distance herself from feeling of vengeance and antagonism. This is why she decides not to keep the house that aunt Tâm gave to her. She refuses to carry with her the memory and hatred of the past, which has haunted the generation of her mother and aunt.

A full moon shone through the dark crown of the trees. A few stars shimmered. I stood there motionless, staring at them. Never in my life had I felt, with such sharpness, the passing of time. Like watching the tail of a comet plummet and disappear into nothingness. Like the span of my life.

Comets extinguish themselves, but memory refuses to die, ...Forgive me, my aunt: I'm going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honour the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crime.⁴⁰

Hằng's determination to discontinue the antagonism of the past and to turn down '*the legacy of past crime*' reflects the attitude of the young generation towards the land reform in particular and historical memory in general. Another example of this viewpoint is the novel *Lão Khố* (The Old Khố) [1992], by the young writer Tạ Duy Anh, as will be examined in the next section.

5.2.4. A Landless Peasant's Perspective

Tạ Duy Anh tells a story of the land reform from the point of view of an old peasant, Lão Khố.⁴¹ The novel's storyline is constructed in a similar way to those of Socialist Realist literature; that is, the narrative is based on the struggle of the peasant through

³⁹ Dương Thu Hương. *Paradise of the Blind*. P. 99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257-258.

⁴¹ Here, he plays with the word 'khố', which literally means 'miserable'. Lão is used for old people, mostly put in front of the name of an old man.

historical changes. But, unlike the heroic pictures of peasants represented in the Socialist Realist literature, Lão Khố is depicted as a fool and a scoundrel of history.

The novel begins with the childhood of Lão Khố. As he was born into a poor landless peasant family, he has to earn his living by working for the landowners in the village. Unexpectedly, his life changes dramatically after being involved with some Communist cadres by accident. When the Communist Party takes control of the Northern part of Vietnam, he is appointed as a political cadre in his own village. He is also the head of a section of the land reform campaign. However, Lão Khố exploits power for personal revenge and cruelly oppresses those who are against him, especially the family of the landlord he used to work for. During the period of land reform, many innocent villagers are killed on his orders. Anyone categorised as a landlord has to endure insults, discrimination and torture, which were officially encouraged by the Party cadres, including Lão Khố.

The novel also reflects that Lão Khố, as a peasant, is not only a villain but also a victim of the uncertainty and unreliability of the government policies. Lão Khố, after the land reform programme finishes, is accused of having collaborated with the French. However, he is later proved innocent and allowed to return to his former position as the chief of the village committee. Lão Khố strictly follows the government policy in order to assure his loyalty and ideological strength towards the Party. However, again Lão Khố becomes a victim of political vicissitude when the members of the landlord's family, once categorised as 'traitors and enemies of the people', return to the village after the end of the war against American troops. They begin to establish, with their money, a good relationship with the authorities. These former victims of the land reform get revenge against Lão Khố by accusing him of having had contact with foreign enemies. Once again, he is arrested and jailed, but then released.

Tạ Duy Anh clearly points out that the ups and downs in Lão Khố's life result from his own ignorance. Lão Khố is ignorant enough to allow himself to be manipulated by official authorities and he blindly follows government policies. Lão Khố believes in what he is told to do and that it is a good thing for the people. The narrator stresses that it is this blind belief that has changed the poor peasant into a villain and turned him against his own village fellows. In a dream, Lão Khố is taken to the court and

interrogated by the judge about the crimes he committed. Through the words of the judge, this is how the author wants Lão Khố to be evaluated:

The judge: 'Do you believe in what you have done? For example, you abolished the village market, did not allow people to attend religious services, destroyed Buddha images, and forced people to get married though they did not love each other. What do you believe in and what did you expect to gain from doing these things?

Lão Khố: 'I did everything for my people.'

The judge: 'But your people did not really want your favours. The crimes you committed can be summarised in one word 'Stupid'.⁴²

Tạ Duy Anh goes beyond the official rhetoric on the heroism of peasants by emphasising the sufferings endured by them. The peasants are manipulated to use cruel and inhumane actions against each other during the land reform. For Tạ Duy Anh, the peasants are merely the fools of history. Lão Khố's tragedy is his belief in vague and unreliable instructions.

Lão Khố argued: 'if we have nothing to believe in, what would we live for?' And then he cried bitterly and openly. 'Listen to me, Lão Khố. Nobody said that you couldn't believe. In fact, the worst thing is what people believe. I just wish and pray that your belief will transform itself, and wouldn't turn a human being into a devil.'⁴³

Tạ Duy Anh's writing about the land reform shows his attempt to connect himself to the past and understand the mentality and motives of people during that period. As a representative of the young generation, Tạ Duy Anh expresses the mixed feelings of the young Vietnamese towards national history. It is a struggle between pride and shame. Vietnamese history is known for its heroism in defeating the troops of powerful countries; namely, French, Japanese and American, but it is also full of losses and tragedies. The post-war identity of Vietnam rests on the self-serving memory that the country is the winner of the wars. However, Tạ Duy Anh's novel highlights that the official effort to put the rhetoric of victory on the surface cannot

⁴² Tạ Duy Anh. *Lão Khố* (The Old Khố). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1992. P. 156.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

bury the nation's traumatic memory of the previous mistakes. Tạ Duy Anh's anxiety is also related to the indecisive conclusion about whether or not the peasants should be seen as heroes or villains. It is undeniable that national independence has relied on the force of the peasants, but the national history is also marred by the peasants' naivety and ignorance. Thus, writing about the peasants and the land reform is, for the young writer Tạ Duy Anh, a means not only to understand and evaluate history, but also to challenge the official version of national history.

It is evident that Tạ Duy Anh's perception of past events is different from that of his older colleagues. While older writers, such as Ngô Ngọc Bội, seem to accept that the failure of the land reform is inescapably a part of historical development, Tạ Duy Anh, like Dương Thu Hương, feels alienated from the past. He even refuses to be a part of it, as shown through the character Hai Duy, a son of Lão Khố. Hai Duy leaves his village because he is unable to tolerate the hatred between classes, the use of violence in the village, and particularly the chauvinism of his own father. His leaving symbolises the denial of the past and the refusal to collaborate with old concepts and practices. The message in the letter that Hai Duy leaves for Lão Khố before his departure clearly reflects the young generation's rejection of the terror in the past and the desire for social change and a better society:

For me, the Đồng village is like a prison. You (Lão Khố) are both prison warden and prisoner number one. You have bound yourself and enjoyed the jingling sound of the chains. I felt suffocated even when I was trying to think that I was a happy person. I realise that you have turned your villagers into obedient people. They only know how to say 'yes.' That is very useful for control, but it goes against their interests. Your kingdom is filled with hatred, with superciliousness regarding the past, and with illusions about the future.

Your kingdom is lacking in air with which people can breathe. There is only pale light reflecting from the past. People are dyed with the same colour. They are not allowed to look forward, to shout or to cry openly because of shame or happiness. They have to look at each others' feet so that they will not walk faster than the others. People can show their sincerity only by whispering. As a result, 'Murmur' becomes a characteristic. All faces look alike. They are the faces of the slippery people, without souls, stupid, no emotion, and always

looking up to morality. No one is allowed to think for herself or himself. Their obligation is to follow the orders when they eat or sleep. They have to forget the existence of the individual self.⁴⁴

Tạ Duy Anh proposes that the young peasants should learn from the mistakes of the past, like the character Hai Duy who clearly announces that he would not follow in his father's footsteps. The rejection of the past and criticism of the land reform also appear in his other writings. For example in the short story *Bước Qua Lời Nguyên* (Step over The Oath) [1989] Tạ Duy Anh reveals that the Party's view on class exploitation is in turn exploited by some peasants and they use it for personal revenge, which is the practice that the young generation in the story strongly refuse to continue. In another short story, *Vòng Trầm Luân Trần Gian* (The Misfortunes of the Human World) [1989], the young author openly expresses his irritation at the village community's inability to get over the past conflicts. People are living with the memories of the old days, especially those of the land reform campaign. However, none of these short stories is as successful as the novel *Lão Khổ* (The Old Khổ). According to the literary critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, this novel 'gives another hypothesis (*giả thuyết văn học*) about the essence and destiny of Vietnamese peasants. This is an important novel.'⁴⁵

5.2.5. An Eyewitness's Perspective

A remarkable account of the changes in village life brought by the land reform campaign is the memoir *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days) [1993] by Võ Văn Trục. It gives a picture of how a Vietnamese village was affected by the experiments of a Socialist-based policy. The clash between new and old values in village life after the August Revolution of 1945 is also revealed. The story is based on a personal memory, and the narrator tells the story in the first person. The narrator recounts in vivid detail his memories of childhood and his observations of the changes in the village. Võ Văn Trục's memoir can be regarded as a historical account of the development of a Vietnamese village. The connection between memory and history is explained by LaCapra:

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

⁴⁵ Hoàng Ngọc Hiến. An interview in *Tác phẩm chọn lọc* 3, 1995. P. 132.

Of course memory is not identical with history. But neither is it the opposite of history. Their relation over time may vary, but not as a function of a categorical opposition between 'us' and 'them'. And the problem of their actual and desirable interaction is oversimplified by a stark opposition between the two. Memory is a crucial source for history and has complicated relations to documentary sources...Conversely, history serves to question and test memory in crucial fashion and to specify what in it is empirically accurate or has a different, but still possibly significant status.⁴⁶

The development of the story is closely related to the development of the narrator. The narrator's viewpoint changes gradually in accordance with his experience and maturity. When he is young, he looks at new things in the village with excitement and optimism. Only when he is more experienced and mature, does he begin to realise that the price peasants had to pay for the revolutionary goal of establishing a socialist agricultural system was rather high.

In *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days), Võ Văn Trục emphasises that village relationships were destroyed by the concept of class struggle applied during the land reform campaign. In fact, this is an issue underlined in most narratives about the land reform. Having been warned that the enemies might have disguised themselves in the village, peasants began to spy and inform on each other. Võ Văn Trục describes how the atmosphere of the village, during the days of land reform, was poisoned by hunger, terror, hatred and distrust. He calls this a kind of paranoia, as '*tinh thần cảnh giác quá cao*' (the excessively high spirit of vigilance). Some villagers are accused for ridiculous reasons for informing. Here were some examples:

Let's listen to an old man accusing Mrs. Hinh:

'When the cadres collecting agricultural tax came to your place, you invited them to eat sweet potatoes. What you did can be interpreted both ways: either you tried to bribe the cadres or you showed contempt towards them. You only offered sweet potatoes to cadres. You reserved nice food for the reactionaries, didn't you?'

Or this is how a woman accused Mr. Thọ:

⁴⁶Quoted in Molasky, Michael S. *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*. P. 4.

'One day I saw you come out from Mrs. Doan's house with a fish in your hand. Do you remember what material was used to wrap the fish? It was a piece of paper with the picture of Chairman Mao. You meant to ridicule the international leader of the communists, didn't you?'⁴⁷

The time-span of *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days) is extended to the establishment of collectivisation in the 1960s. What Võ Văn Trục is trying to highlight through the reminiscence of the land reform and the establishment of collective farms is the issue of cultural destruction caused by the lack of vision and well-planned policy for rural development. The village party committee turned the village hall into a storage centre and office for the co-operative. Also, there was an attempt to overthrow traditional values and practices in the village. For example, the pronoun '*đồng chí*' (comrade) was introduced. At the village hall, people had to address each other, even the members of their family, as comrade instead of in kinship terms.

Not all traditions, the narrator argues, are meaningless. For example, the village committee agreed to abolish the worship of *Thần Nông* (the God of Agriculture) because it was considered outdated and superstitious. The big banyan tree also had to be cut down because it was the place where *Thần Nông*'s altar was located. For the narrator, the significance of the banyan tree was more than just a place to pay respect to *Thần Nông*. It was a gathering place for children and gave shelter to passers-by and all kinds of birds. When the tree was brought down and the altar was removed, the narrator felt he was disconnected from his childhood. Also, the link between the present and the past seemed to be severed:

Farewell to the familiar sandbank of the buffalo- tending boys. Farewell to the banyan tree which provided shade for the children on hot summer afternoons. Also, farewell to those lovely birds. The banyan tree was cut down. The sky suddenly looked empty. When the tree disappeared so did my childhood and innocence.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Võ Văn Trục. *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days). Hanoi: NXB Lao Động, 1993. P. 153.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Võ Văn Trục acknowledges that village culture and childhood memory are his main concerns as a creative writer. Nostalgia of the past is also a dominant theme in his award-winning reportage for the *Literature and the Arts* journal, *Tiếng Kêu Cứu của Vùng Văn Hoá* (A Cultural Village Asks for Help) [1989]. Here, he explains the importance of the village:

My village, like other thousands of villages in Vietnam, is very small. It is so small that nobody include it on a map of the country. But, this is a cell that participated in creating the nation's great history. It is the place that formed and shaped the mentality of generations of children. It taught us how to love, hate, plough and carry weapons.⁴⁹

The narrator describes how agonizing it is when he cannot identify where the tomb of his mother is located. This incident must have been taken from his own experience, as it is also mentioned in his memoir *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days). It was suggested during the construction of the agricultural co-operative that tombs should also be collectivised. Consequently, the village graveyard was destroyed and the bones of the dead were gathered in one place. However, the Vietnamese prefer to pay respect to their ancestors' souls separately, and the collectivisation of ancestors' souls and bodies seemed too radical for many Vietnamese people. The narrator lit sticks of incense and put them in different corners of the graveyard. By doing so, he hoped that his mother would acknowledge his worship. For Võ Văn Trục, the worship of ancestors is important because it reflects the gratitude of children towards their ancestors and respect for their origins. Also, he saw the destruction of tombs as the destruction of the history of the village. These tombs were the pride of villagers because they were the reminders of what their ancestors and the village contributed to the nation.

Võ Văn Trục's emphasis on village values can be seen as a struggle to recover local memory and to highlight the individual characteristics of particular communities.

Since the 1950s, folk culture was studied widely in order to promote the role of peasants in society. However, those studies of village customs and traditions

⁴⁹ Võ Văn Trục, 'Tiếng Kêu Cứu của Một Vùng Văn Hoá' (A Cultural Village Asks for Help) in *Người Đàn Bà Quỳ: Tập Truyện-Ký chọn lọc* (A Woman Kneels: Collection of Short Stories and Reportages). NXB Nông Nghiệp, 1988. P. 115.

concentrate on the similarity of villages in general, rather than on the singularity of each village. Folklore scholars tend to overlook the specificity of local history.⁵⁰ Things began to change in the late 1980s to early 1990s. The Vietnamese government paid more attention to village culture and the movement to reconstruct traditional culture and promote the local history of particular villages spread all over the country.⁵¹

— see John Kleinen, *Sham, Malory*

Thus, from what Võ Văn Trục witnesses, the land reform and agricultural collectivisation campaign caused a conflict of values in the countryside. The conflict occurred, as argued in his works, partly because the radical reform was implemented and partly because peasants were expected to give up their beliefs overnight. The change proposed for the worship of ancestors described in Võ Văn Trục's works is a good example of the extremist policies imposed upon the Vietnamese countryside. However, for the coverage of this subject, special credit should be given to a most controversial reportage of the 1980s, *Cái Đêm Hôm ấy...Đêm gì?* (That Night...What is the Night?) [1988], by Phùng Gia Lộc,⁵² which revealed how government policy caused psychological damage to peasants. What makes this reportage different from other reportages, novels and short stories published in the late 1980s is that it reveals more than rural poverty and village bullies. It gives a clear, but subtle, picture of the dehumanisation of peasants.

The narrator witnesses the conflict between the Confucian belief in life after death and the social responsibility of citizens in a Socialist state. The narrator's family have to starve themselves because their grandmother is dying and they want to serve the rice they have at her funeral ceremony. To prepare for the grandmother's funeral, the narrator's wife buys a coffin and hides the saved rice in it. On the night of the tax

⁵⁰ Pelley, Patricia Marie. *Writing Revolution: The New History in Post-Colonial Vietnam*. Ph.D. dissertation. Cornell University, 1993. P. 119.

⁵¹ For example, in Thanh Hoá province, the plan to revive village culture and tradition was implemented in 1991-1992. In *Văn Hoá Làng và Xây Dựng Làng Văn Hoá*. Thanh Hoá: Sở Văn Hoá Thông Tin Thanh Hoá, 1993.

⁵² The information about Phùng Gia Lộc is limited. According to Chu Giang and Nguyễn Văn Lưu, apart from this famous reportage, Phùng Gia Lộc, also worked as a schoolteacher and wrote a couple of short stories related to the problems of the management of co-operative systems. When *Cái Đêm Hôm ấy...Đêm gì?* (That Night...What is the Night?) first appeared in *Văn Nghệ*, it received a considerable attention, and readers were ready to pay for a copy of it, even in the form of photocopy. However, it was severely criticised by some officials and critics for its negative content. Chu Giang and Nguyễn Văn Lưu also reveal that Phùng Gia Lộc died in poverty at his home village in Thanh Hoá on 18 January 1992. Chu Giang and Nguyễn Văn Lưu. *Luận Chuyển Văn Chương* (Debates on Literature). Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1995. Pp.352-357.

collecting campaign, a group of cadres arrives at the narrator's house and demands that tax be paid. As the family do not have enough rice and money to pay for the tax, the cadres take everything that could be exchanged for money, such as a bicycle and a kettle. Unfortunately, before they leave, the cadres discover the coffin and the rice. They insist the rice must be given to the co-operative as a part of tax paying despite the cries of children and the grandmother. Like Võ Văn Trực, Phùng Gia Lộc emphasises that what is most dehumanising for peasants is to be forced to give up their most cherished beliefs and family obligations.

and what about woods and stones?

However, the account of the land reform and practices in the countryside shown in memoirs and reportage may not always reflect the objective truth, as the subjectivity of the author is inevitable. This is a means whereby Võ Văn Trực and Phùng Gia Lộc, as eyewitnesses, can share their personal memory with public history. Paul Connerton has explained the connection between memoir and history:

The 'personal' history of the memoir writer has confronted an 'objective' history embroiled in institutions, or in the modification or transformation or even overthrow of institutions...They have been inserted into the structure of dominant institutions and have been able to turn that structure to their own ends. It is this perceived capacity of making a personal intervention that makes it possible for the writers of memoirs to conceive their life retrospectively, and frequently to envisage it prospectively, as a narrative sequence in which they are able to integrate their individual life history with their sense of the course of an objective history.⁵³

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It is noticeable that among the works discussed earlier in this chapter, Ngô Ngọc Bôi's novel is different from the other four works, in that it focuses on retelling the facts of the event itself. Although, towards the end of the story he hints that it is hard for the village relations to be restored, his account is restricted to the period of the land reform campaign. Ngô Ngọc Bôi's main purpose in writing *Ác Mộng* (Nightmare) was only to unfold the truth. The other four authors try to show the enduring effects of the

⁵³ Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. P. 19.

land reform programme in the national memory, and to highlight the traumatic psychological effects of the campaign on individuals' consciousness and memory.

Of course, we cannot conclude that the accounts of the land reform given or reconstructed in the works of Ngô Ngọc Bội, Dương Thu Hương, Đỗ Chu, Võ Văn Trục and Tạ Duy Anh are entirely based on actual facts. What is presented in these literary works cannot be seen as total truth, but it should be considered as fragmented truth based on individual experiences and imaginations. Different perspectives on the land reform programme given in literature also reflect the attempt of writers to challenge the official invent of national history. In literary texts, writers can imagine and relate themselves to the past, and in some cases can pass his or her experience on to later generations. As Võ Văn Trục clearly explains, the purpose of his writing was:

To write down the story of old days, I do not mean to blame anybody for the errors we are trying to avoid. My purpose is to remind ourselves that we should not repeat those errors. 'We' here includes not only those who witnessed the errors but also the later generations.⁵⁴

This shared traumatic memory of past errors links together Vietnamese writers from different generations, from Ngô Ngọc Bội to Tạ Duy Anh. The memory of the land reform is not completely removed from the social realm. It is still an unfading memory, and its moral ambiguity and social ambivalence have a great influence on present-day consciousness. The violence and hatred that writers of all generations contend should be replaced with love and forgiveness. The collection of land reform narratives is a phantasmagoric reflection of the past, and is a part of the socially contested process to relocate social memory within relations of power and domination. The memory of the land reform will continue to be challenged and settled in Vietnamese literary texts for as long as the search for truth cannot be properly conducted elsewhere.

⁵⁴ Võ Văn Trục. *Chuyện Làng Ngày ấy* (The Village in Those Days). P. 206.

Conclusions

It can be seen throughout the development of the literature about peasants and the countryside that this literary corpus is closely connected to the wartime context and the Vietnamese Communist attempt to turn an agrarian country into a Socialist state. The emergence of peasants as main characters in Vietnamese written literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be attributed to Confucian scholars' recognition that the war against the French could not rely on the royal court and mandarins. Instead, the struggle required the contribution of peasants, and in fact this peasant guerrilla warfare was the strategy the Communist government employed throughout the long period of struggle until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The mobilisation of peasantry was also a key factor for its victory over foreign troops. The construction of peasant characters and portrayal of the countryside in Vietnamese literature rests upon the significance of peasants in political and military struggles. Meanwhile, the countryside was a place where the revolution was carried out. However, the unification of the country when the war finished in 1975, and the political and economic reforms introduced in 1986, have brought new changes into Vietnamese literary scenes in general and into the representation of peasants and the countryside in particular.

Under colonial rule, writers sympathised with peasants who revolted against the French policy of tax and the corvée labour system. The heroic deeds of peasants became an inspiration in works by Confucian writers in the late nineteenth century and the modern writers who emerged in the early twentieth century. In the early period of Modern literature (1900-1930), poverty in the countryside became a main focus in literary works. The deprivation of the peasantry was highlighted in order to attack the oppression of the colonial government. In the period between 1930-1945, the peasant revolts against the tax system of the French administration, notably the Soviet-Nghệ Tĩnh in the central region of the country, provoked the social consciousness among Vietnamese writers. The deterioration of traditional customs, the influx of western values and political turmoil in the city caused despair among urban writers. They began to look for peace and traditional culture in the countryside, which was regarded as the source of indigenous culture, intact from foreign influence. The prominent writers of this period, such as Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng and Hoàng Đạo, romanticised the countryside and the peasant way of life. Meanwhile, other writers,

such as Nguyễn Công Hoan, Nguyễn Hồng and Nam Cao, who were influenced by Marxist ideology, focused on depicting the sufferings and deprivation of peasants. Through their works, they showed sympathy for their fellow countrymen, while also criticising the French government.

The importance of peasants in the fight against foreign troops and the construction of a Socialist country was put to the fore by the Communist Party, which was established in 1930. Since then, peasants and rural problems began to dominate the Vietnamese literary scene, particularly in the northern part of the country. When the Communist Party came into the power in 1945, it paid considerable attention to peasants as the main force of the struggle against foreign troops and the construction of a Socialist society. Peasants are idealised and glorified as the masters of the revolution in the 1945-1954 literature. However, this caused inner conflict among writers themselves as not all intellectuals and writers had full faith in their uneducated ragged country fellows or totally believed in their ability to fulfil their the revolutionary tasks. The short story *Đôi Mắt* (A Pair of Eye) [1948] by Nam Cao shows an attempt to change intellectuals and writers' view towards peasants.

In the early 1950s, writers were required to live with peasants and work in rice fields in order to have a better understanding of peasants' life and problems. One reason for this programme was to prepare for the land reform campaign of 1953-1957. Through the novels, short stories and reportages written during this period, the concept of class struggle is employed to explain the poverty and oppression of peasants.

From the late 1950s until the end of the war in 1975, writers focused on portraying how peasants adapted themselves to agricultural communes and the problems of collective farms. Some writers began to have a critical viewpoint towards peasants and to be convinced by Marx's comment that the peasantry would be an obstruction to Socialist development. This is due to the fact that a number of peasants were reluctant to give up their private land and tools and join the co-operative. At the same time, the war against the Americans was intensified. While men were required to take part in the conflict, women were required to take more responsibility in agricultural production and the management of the collective farms. In some areas, women also had to participate in the military struggle. As a result, peasant women emerged in the

literary works of the 1960s as glorified guerrilla fighters and dutiful agricultural labourers.

Although the images of Vietnamese peasants portrayed in literary works were controlled by the party lines and used as war propaganda, revolutionary writers never failed to acknowledge the heroic contribution of peasants and the important role of the countryside in the long period of struggle and attempt to construct a Socialist state. The representation of peasants found in Vietnamese literature prior to 1975 reflects Ngo Vinh Long's characterisation of Vietnamese peasants:

The Vietnamese peasants were not simply animals reacting angrily to hunger. Instead, they were patient human beings who organised themselves cell by cell, block by block, friendship association by friendship association, mutual aid group by mutual aid group, village by village, district by district and so on, in the hope of liberating themselves and their country. It was this hope for a better world-as well as the knowledge of possible success in creating such a world-that propelled them into action and them so resilient in their struggle.¹

With their resilience and perseverance, Vietnamese peasants could survive the wartime hardships, as is clearly shown in the literary works written before 1975. However, the post-1975 literature shows that the problems of the peasants and the countryside became even more difficult in the post-war period. The end of the Vietnam-America War in 1975 signified not only the unification of the country but also the first time in many decades that Vietnam was at peace. The announcement of the open-door policy, the plans for a market economy and the guarantee of freedom of expression in 1986 marked another significant turning point in post-war Vietnamese society as well as in the development of Vietnamese literature. Literary life, which had been interwoven with the political and military struggle, began to abandon its wartime duty of serving politics and tried to portray life in a more realistic way and to concentrate more on literary merits. However, this is not to say that writers failed to voice the dreams and worries of peasants. In fact, the post-1975 Vietnamese literature not only describes the decline of the collective farms but also reflects peasant anxiety

¹ Ngo Vinh Long. *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. Pp. xv-xvi.

throughout this transitional period from centralised economic control to the development of market economy.

In the 1975-1986 period, the literary works by Ngô Ngọc Bội and Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn reflect the deterioration of agricultural collectivisation and the despair of peasants. In the early 1980s, Nguyễn Minh Châu and Lê Lưu constructed two peasant characters: Khúng and Giang Minh Sài, who represented a significant departure in Vietnamese writing about peasants. They are individual peasants with complex characters that combine good and bad qualities. This characterisation replaced the black and white portrayal of peasants and highlighted the element of individuality that had long been forbidden in Vietnamese society. A series of novels, short stories and reportages published in the late 1980s, and a greater freedom allowed by the Renovation policy, marked a new era in the writing about peasants and the countryside. On one hand, these stories emphasised the complexity of their peasant characters and look at them as individual human beings, not as the stereotypes that had appeared in the previous periods of literature. On the other hand, they reflected changes in the countryside brought about by forces from outside. Village life is threatened by industrial growth and urban development. The unavoidable confrontation between urban civilisation and village culture is discussed in many works.

However, peace in the post-1975 and Renovation period allowed writers to explore other issues that had to be overlooked during wartime. For example, gender inequality and the oppression of peasant women from the patriarchy and kinship system are discussed and questioned in literature to an unprecedented degree. Of course, gender inequality is not a new topic in Vietnamese literature, but it did not normally include women from lower classes in the agenda. Also, it can be seen that the land reform programme and its failure began to be the centre of attention in literary works although it is not openly included in the public discussion. The recollection of the land reform reflects an attempt to understand the past and to distinguish truths from myths. In the process, it also allows individual memoirs to take part in the construction of collective memory as well as the history of rural transformation.

The arrival of peasants as main characters in Vietnamese literature is due to the special character of the twentieth century historical context. That is to say, Vietnamese people from all classes and walks of life had to come together for the

survival of the nation. The struggle for national independence would not have been completed without the contribution of the peasantry, the majority of Vietnamese people. As is widely recognised in Vietnam, nobody sacrificed and lost more than the peasants for the cause of the nation and the Socialist agricultural experiment.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to predict the future of peasants and the countryside in twenty-first century Vietnamese literature. It is said in a study on class that *'[s]ocialism- especially Marxist socialism-is a theory which has been elaborated mainly by intellectuals and applied by intellectuals to political practice.'*² This comment is applicable to the case of Socialist development in Vietnam as it is observed that the Vietnamese Communist party was founded and principally run by bourgeois intellectuals who were trained in Western schools. Needless to say, the Socialist revolution did not lead Vietnam to a Socialist country. Instead, it was destined to move towards market-orientated economy. Intellectuals and middle-class people began to regain their privileged status and played an important role in the post-war society whereas the peasants began to be marginalized, if not forgotten.

Moreover, industrialisation and modernisation in post-war Vietnamese society depends on the contribution of intellectuals and the middle-class rather the peasantry. Since the declaration of the Renovation policy in 1986, the gap between the rich and the poor, and between the city and the countryside has been getting wider. Peasant protests against local officials in the late 1980s³, and the building of the golf courts in the mid 1990s⁴ proved that the peasants' struggle still continues.

Vietnamese society is in the process of transformation from a centralised economic system to a market economy. This process of economic transformation is certainly having a great influence on Vietnamese villages and the peasant way of life. Vietnamese writers are fully aware that the socio-political changes in their society, due to the process of industrialisation and urbanisation, will have implications for the future direction of literature. As is stated in the report to the Sixth National Conference of the Vietnam Writers' Association in April 2000:

² Fetscher, Iring, 'Some Theories on the Role of Intellectuals in the Revolutionary Labour-movement. Brecht and Sartre' in *Social Classes Action and Historical Materialism*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982. P7.

³ For more information, see Cima, Ronald, J., 'Vietnam's Economic Reform Approaching the 1990s' in *Asian Survey*. Vol. XXIX, no. 8, August 1989. Finkelstein, David M., 'Vietnam: A Revolution in Crisis' in *Asian Survey*. Vol. XXVII, no. 9, 1987.

⁴ See more in www.fva.org

Industrialisation and modernisation will bring changes to each family and each individual, even to those peasants that seem always familiar to us. Peasants will also change to be peasants on the verge of industrialisation, standing before the strong control of the law of industry and market economy. The way they think and what they have to worry about will be different. However, at the same time, the countryside and those peasants in the environment that is not yet destroyed by urban way of life and polluted by industrial residual will be a reservation and source of Vietnamese culture. The first priority of the literature of 2000-2005 is to reflect the process of modernisation. Besides the peasants, the construction workers, traders, intellectuals and scientists will be the main characters in this transitional period from agriculture-based economy into industrial economy. This will be a great inspiration for our literature not only for the literature written during the process of social and economic transformation but also for the literature of the next generation.⁵

It is difficult to predict how peasants will be represented in the next period of Vietnamese literature, and to precisely tell whether or not they will disappear from the scene or stay in the background as they did in nineteen centuries of Confucian literature. Also, only time will tell if Vietnamese peasants and village customs can survive the forces of capitalist industrialisation and the stream of globalisation. However, as demonstrated in previous chapters, peasants have been a great inspiration for twentieth-century Vietnamese literature. Their sacrifices and contribution to the national liberation have been unfailingly acknowledged in literary works. The dominance of peasant stories in the twentieth century in general, and the attempt to depict a realistic picture of Vietnamese peasants in the post-1975 period in particular, tell us a great deal about the sufferings of Vietnamese people in the long traumatic period of war, and how they have to adjust themselves into post-war economic, political and social changes.

⁵ Printed in *Văn Nghệ*, no. 17 (22-04-2000), p. 6.

Appendix: Writers' Biography

Dương Hương was born in 1949 in Thái Bình. He was, during the war, in the Youth Brigade and participated in the military fighting in the South. He is now working for a government department in Quảng Ninh. He received a literary award for the short story *Đêm Trăng* (The Night of Moonlight) in 1990 by *Army Literature and the Arts* magazine, and the novel *Bến Không Chông* (The Không Chông Wharf) in 1991 by the Vietnam Writers' Association.

Dương Thu Hương was born in 1947 in Hanoi. Her mother is a schoolteacher and her father a tailor. She was a leader of a Communist Youth Brigade, and also one of the first women to volunteer for the battle on the northern border when the conflict between China and Vietnam took place in 1979. Dương Thu Hương was not only a writer, but also an outspoken social critic, and an advocate of political reforms in Vietnam. After serving seven months in prison in 1991, she has been living in Hanoi under strict official surveillance. Her controversial novels include *Paradise of the Blind* and *Novel without a Name*, which are available in English translation.

Đào Vũ was born in 1927 in Hưng Yên to a Confucian scholar's family which had supported the revolution since the French Resistance. Đào Vũ has been a member of the Vietnam Writers' Association since it was established in 1957. He worked for *Literature and the Arts*. Đào Vũ is now retired and lives in Hanoi. He is a prolific writer, but his is best known for the novel *Cái Sân Gạch* (The Brick Yard) [1959], which was awarded a literary prize by the Vietnam Writers' Association and has been published several times.

Đoàn Lê (pseudonym of Đoàn Thị Lê, also known as Hạ Thảo) was born in 1943 in Hải Phòng. She has worked in the film industry as an actress, scriptwriter and film director. She is now working for the Vietnamese Film Company (Hãng Phim Việt Nam). Her works include *Cuốn Gia Phả để lại* (Remaining Book) which was awarded the best novel of 1989-1990, and the historical novel *Người Đẹp và Đức Vua* (The Beauty and the King).

Đỗ Chu was born in 1944 in Bắc Giang. During his early twenties, his short stories about war became well-known to readers. He served in the army until 1975, then worked for the Vietnam Writers' Association in Hanoi where he is now a committee member in the prose section.

Lại Văn Long was born in 1965 in Đà Lạt. He received a first degree in Philosophy, is now working as an editor for *Ho Chi Minh City's Police* newspaper (Báo Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh). In the early 1980s, he started writing short stories, most of which were published in journals. His best-known work *Kẻ Sát Nhân Lương Thiện* (A Moralistic Murderer) awarded the best short story prize for 1991 by *Literature and the Arts* magazine.

Lê Lưu was born in 1942 in Hưng Yên. During the war, he served the country as a military journalist. After that, he worked as a secretary for *Army Literature and the Arts* magazine's editorial board. Lê Lưu also attended a writer's training course organised by the Vietnam Writers' Association. Some of his award-winning works include *Người Cầm Súng* (Warrior), which won a second prize for short story of the year 1967-1968 by *Literature and the Art* journal, and *Thời Xa Vắng* (A Time Far Past), which received the best novel prize for 1986 by the Vietnam Writers' Association. The novel was translated into English by 1997.

Ma Văn Kháng (pseudonym of Đinh Trọng Đoàn) was born in 1936 in Hanoi. In 1960, he started studying at Hanoi Teacher's Training College. After graduating, he taught at a secondary school in Lào Cai, where he was promoted to Headmaster. A few years later, he moved to the city and worked as a civil official at the party headquarter of Lào Cai. His experience of the life in mountainous areas and his understanding of minority people are reflected in a number of his works. In 1976, he moved to Hanoi and worked for the Lao Động publishing house. He has been the editor of *The Vietnam Literature Review*, an English language magazine published by the Vietnam Writers' Association since 1995. His well-known works are an award-winning novel *Mùa Lá Rụng trong Vườn* (A Season with Falling Leaves in the Garden) [1986] and the collection of short stories, *Trăng Soi Sân Nhỏ* (Moonlight and Small Yard) [1995], which won a Seawrite Literary Award.

Ngô Ngọc Bội was born in 1929 in Phú Thọ. From 1945-1948, he was a member of the Youth National Salvation (Thanh Niên Cứu Quốc). From 1949-1957, he worked as a propaganda cadre in Hoà Bình, Phú Thọ and Vĩnh Phú. From 1968-1993, he was on the editorial staff of *Literature and the Arts* journal. At present he is retired and lives in Hanoi. Ngô Ngọc Bội wrote mainly about peasants and the countryside. His successful works include *Bộ Quần Áo Mới* (New Clothes), awarded best short story prize by *Literature* magazine in 1960, and the novel *Ao Làng* (Villang Pond), which received literary awards from many organisations.

Nam Cao (1917-1951) is a pseudonym of Trần Hữu Tri. He also published his works under other names, such as Thuý Rư, Xuân Du, Nguyệt and Nhiều Khê). Nam Cao was born in Hà Nam. He attended school in Nam Định. In 1936, he started writing and his works began to appear in journals and magazines. In 1938, he became a schoolteacher. He first taught in Hanoi, but then moved to Thái Bình before being transferred to a school in his hometown. Nam Cao joined the revolution in 1943. While carrying out revolutionary tasks, he disguised himself as a journalist. He was killed on 30 November, 1951 by foreign soldiers when he was on duty as a cadre of the agricultural tax campaign. Nam Cao is considered one of Vietnamese greatest writers, and his short story *Chí Phèo* is regarded as a masterpiece.

Ngô Tất Tố (1894-1954) was born on the outskirts of Hanoi. He is a Confucian scholar, schoolteacher, writer and journalist. He joined in the revolution in 1946, and later took in the French Resistance. His famous works are *Tắt Đèn* (When the Light is Out) [1937] and *Việc Làng* (Village Affairs)[1940]. He died in 1954 in Bắc Giang province.

Nguyễn Công Hoan (1903-1977) was born in Bắc Ninh (now is a part of Hưng Yên province). He is regarded as one of the pioneers of the Realist Literary Movement in Vietnam. Nguyễn Công Hoan is a prolific writer and a prominent figure in Vietnamese literature. His works are reprinted, widely read and well researched.

Nguyễn Đình Thi was born in 1924 in Laos. In 1931, his family brought him back to Hanoi where he attended school. From 1941, he carried out revolutionary activities. Nguyễn Đình Thi was the leader of several literary institutes and party organisations.

He is a well-known novelist, poet, playwright and writer of children stories. His well-known novels include *Xung Kích* (Guerrilla Troops) [1951], and which was awarded the Hồ Chí Minh literary prize in 1996, and *Vỡ Bờ* (Broken Shore) [1970].

Nguyễn Hữu Nhân was born in 1938 in Phú Thọ. He now works in the Culture and Information office of Việt Trì province. He has published a few novels and short stories, including the novel *Không Cô Đơn* (Not Lonely) [1998].

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was born in 1950 in Hanoi, where his mother was a street vender. He spent much of his youth in various provinces of the Northwest area. There, his mother became an agricultural labourer. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp moved back to Hanoi in 1960 to pursue his degree in history at Hanoi Teacher's Training College. He left Hanoi during the war and moved to a remote province in the Northwest region where he taught history to schoolchildren. His short stories first appeared in literary journals in early 1987, soon after the Renovation policy was announced. He became well-known and attracted considerable attention for his three historical short stories published in 1988. A number of short stories were translated into English in the collection *The General Retires and Other Stories* in 1992, by Greg Lockhart.

Nguyễn Khắc Trường (also known as Thao Trường) was born in 1946 in Thái Nguyên. He served in the military from 1965 until the war ended in 1975. After his graduation from Nguyễn Du Literary School, he joined the prose section of *Army Literature and the Arts* journal, where he is now a co-editor-in-chief. His best-known novel *Mảnh Đất Lắm Người Nhiều Ma* (A Plot of Land with Many People and Ghosts) was awarded the best novel prize of 1991 by the Vietnam Writers' Association. It was translated into French in 1996.

Nguyễn Khải (pseudonym of Nguyễn Mạnh Khải) was born in 1930 in Hanoi. He left school and joined the army at the age of 16. He started writing in 1955, and later worked for *Army Literature and the Arts* magazine. In 1988, he was transferred to the Vietnam Writers' Association. Nguyễn Khải now lives with his family in Ho Chi Minh City. He is a prolific writer and has received many literary awards.

Nguyễn Kiên (pseudonym of Nguyễn Quang Hưởng) was born in 1935 in Hà Tây. He took part in the French Resistance and worked for the propaganda office of Việt Minh

in 1947. Nguyễn Kiên had various jobs, such as teacher, Youth Brigade member, political cadre, and editor for many journals and magazines. During 1990-1996, he was a director of the Vietnam Writers' Association publishing House. His literary career started in 1960. Some of his best-known works are *Vùng Quê Yên Tĩnh* (Peaceful Area) [1974] and *Một Cảnh Đời* (A Life) [1992]. Nguyễn Kiên is now living in Hanoi.

Nguyễn Minh Châu was born in 1930 in Nghệ An. In 1945, he went to a polytechnic school in Huế, and then continued his study in a school in Hà Tĩnh. In 1952, he joined the military service. In 1962, he was assigned to work at *Army Literature and the Arts* office in Hanoi where he lived until his death on 23 January 1989. He is famous for his stories about war and soldiers' lives. Among his successful works, is the collection of short stories *Cỏ Lau* (Lau Grass) which received a literary prize in 1988-1989 from the Vietnam Writers' Association.

Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú was born in 1942 in Hanoi. She was a schoolteacher in Sơn Tây before following a journalistic career in the late 1960s. She is now the editor-in-chief of *New Literary Work* journal in Hanoi. She is the mother of the well-known female writer Nguyễn Thị Thu Huệ. Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú is one of the most successful female writers of wartime literature. Her best-known works are *Đất Làng* (Village Land) [1974] and *Buổi Sáng* (In the Morning) [1976].

Nguyễn Văn Bổng was born in 1921 in Quảng Nam. During the war, he carried out literary activities in the South under the pseudonym, Trần Hữu Minh. Since 1972, he worked for the Vietnam Writers' Association and *Literature and the Arts*. Nguyễn Văn Bổng is best-known for his novel *Con Trâu* (Buffalo) which was awarded a literary prize in 1954-1955 by the Vietnamese Association of Arts and Literature (Hội Văn Nghệ Việt Nam).

Tạ Duy Anh was born in 1959 in Hà Tây. He graduated from Nguyễn Du Literary School where he now works as a lecturer. The first collection of his short stories, *Bước Qua Lời Nguyên* (Step over the Oath) appeared in 1990. Some short stories in this collection were awarded literary prizes by different organisations.

Tô Hoài was born as Nguyễn Sen in 1920 on the outskirts of Hanoi. He was one of the writers who founded Vietnam Writers' Association in 1957. Tô Hoài joined the revolution before 1945, and worked as a journalist throughout the period of war. He published more than 150 pieces of works, including novels, short stories, memoirs, reportages and stories for children. Some of his award-winning novels are *Truyện Tây Bắc* (The Story from North West) [1956], *Quê Nhà* (Homeland) [1970] and *Miền Tây* (The Western Region) [1970].

Võ Văn Trục was born in 1936 in Nghệ An. After he graduated from Hanoi Teacher's Training College, Võ Văn Trục worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Between 1962 and 1967, he was on the editorial staff at the Youth Publishing House (Thanh Niên). Since 1977, he has worked for *Literature and the Arts* journal. He is known as a poet, but has also published some prose, such as memoirs and essays concerning Vietnamese village culture.

Vũ Thị Thường (pseudonym of Lê Kim Nga) was born in 1930 in Hà Tây. She was a Communist activist during the French Resistance, and started her writing career in 1957. After 1961, she worked for various journals such as *Literature* magazine, *Literature and the Arts* journal and *New Literary Work* magazine (Tác Phẩm Mới). After the unification of the country, she moved to Ho Chi Minh City, where she has been living and working until the present. She married the famous poet Chế Lan Viên, and is the mother of a young writer, Phan Thị Vàng Anh.

Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912-1939) lived and wrote mainly in central Hanoi. He died of tuberculosis. Vũ Trọng Phụng is a short-lived, but prolific writer. He is also considered as one of Vietnam's greatest writers. His famous novels are *Số Đổ* (Being Lucky), *Vỡ Đê* (Broken Dyke), *Giông Tố* (Storm) and *Làm Đĩ* (Prostitute), which were first published in 1936.

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Note

NXB = Nhà Xuất Bản (Publishing House)

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